

Colors of Deception.

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Note from the author

Dear reader,

I'm a young author who aspires to get published one day. This book is my first published work. The entire inspiration behind this book is having a friend who's your other half- like the other half of your body, without which your entire being can't function properly. The element of deception has been added at every point just to highlight how discreet deceptive people appear sometimes. Please do read my recently published short story, One Man, Two Women. Looking forward to receiving your reviews.

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1. Meeting her

I can vividly remember the day I first met Myra. It was my first day at the University of London, and I entered my Philosophy class a bit peevish. Well, what exactly happened was that on my way to campus, I'd stopped at a nearby café to grab my daily morning coffee, and just as the man handed me a heavenly cup of steaming hot, creamy latte, a frantic blonde kid bumped right into me. That was it- the creamy liquid I was yearning to put in my mouth, a few seconds ago, was all over my Louis Vuitton shirt.

'Damn,' I shouted.

'Watch where you're goin' kid. People got beads instead of eyes nowadays.'

Tears swelled up in the boy's eyes and for a fleeting second I thought of apologizing, but a tall blonde woman appeared from behind and lifted the kid in her arms. Looking at me derisively, she remarked, 'It's not my son's fault if you've got holes in your hands!'

Holes in my hands? Was this woman mad? Instead of reprimanding the kid, she easily put the blame on me and walked away. I had, by this point, become so irascible, that I just walked straight out of the shop. I looked at my white Louis Vuitton in dismay. It had cost me three hundred pounds on sale. Moreover, dad mercilessly refused to clear my credit card until I got into university, so I had sacrificed precious hours of sleep working at a local hardware store to save up

enough to get this limited edition. Now, I just stood looking at the large brown stain.

When I reached campus after half an hour, I was already running late for class, so I decided to forgo the idea of getting breakfast from the college cafeteria. I draped a cashmere shawl over my shoulders to cover up the stain, and walked to my first lecture which I expected to be sparsely attended: it was the first day and most rich kids weren't back from their vacation resorts in Italy and Switzerland, secondly, it was philosophy. However, I was astounded to see the class teeming with students- teeming till the point of over-saturation. The best part was, that, I looked like an absolute mess- like a nurse ambushed by her patients in an asylum.

Strategically, I started to walk up to the last row of_____ seats at the top of the lecture room, when my worst fear came true.

'Miss, whosoever you are, latecomers do not enter without permission,' called the professor from behind.

My heart stopped, my palms became clammy, and sweat droplets formed at the top of my upper lip. The situation was a catastrophe I wanted to escape by either being swallowed by the earth or blending in the vast assortment of colors that defined the outlook of the room. I turned around to see all eyes on me.

'What's your name?' the professor inquired.

'Rachel,' I answered in a voice so meek that it was barely audible to my ears.

‘Come again, please.’

Just then, when I thought I would faint, a girl seated near where I was standing tugged at my sleeve to make me sit down. She stood up confidently and in a crystal clear voice, as loud as thunder, replied, ‘Professor, her name is Rachel, and she doesn’t know how to speak English, and I forgot to explain the rules to her. I’m incredibly sorry.’

I looked at this girl incredulously. I was immensely grateful to her for intervening to save me, but her blatant announcement was a disgrace: not only because I was a native, but all the more because I’d been a recipient of the best English reader and writer award throughout high school, which made her declaration even more repugnant.

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‘Why did you say that? Couldn’t you have thought of a better reply?’

‘Well, you said your name so faintly that I actually thought you have some communication issues. Besides, you shouldn’t be acting like an ungrateful piece of shit right now.’

‘For your information I’ve lived in Surrey all my life, and my ancestors had links to the royal family. I hope this proves how English I am.’

At this, she emitted a chuckle, then took out a tissue paper and gave it to me.

‘Alright, Duchess Rachel, pardon me. Now, you better wipe your forehead, because it seems as if you came out of an eighty degrees steam room.’

My second encounter with Myra was in the library, exactly three days after she publically declared my lack of proficiency in English. I had a political science lecture in about two hours, so I sat in the library, going through a multitude of books on the subject. Just then, Myra walked up with a pile of books in one hand. I was struck by how ravishingly beautiful she looked with long ebony hair, bronze-colored skin, and large, dark eyes, the kind that have a deep abyss, full of knowledge, which elevates one to a certain level of percipience. The thing that really struck me was her height. She seemed a bit over five ten or five eleven, though she was wearing flats. And this new-found beauty was more astonishing because it wasn't there when I first met her- it was as if God had bestowed her with a huge favor overnight, by remodeling and sculpting her obnoxious facial features into dainty ones, or perhaps, this beauty wasn't a serendipitous appearance, but was actually present at the first place, but I was too much of a bundle of nerves to notice. Whatever the case may be, I did not like this girl and was in no way ready to engage in conversation; so in a bid to avoid her, I rushed towards the end of the aisle and turned to enter the adjacent one, when she walked in right from the front. Our eyes met, and the expression she gave me was the exact opposite of what I was expecting. She didn't sigh irritably, like 'ahh, you again or look who's here.'

Instead, she looked at me with the kind of amusement and joy that crosses your face when you see an old pal.

'Oh, hi, Rachel, what a pleasant surprise.'

‘Hi, umm, sorry I totally forgot to ask your name,’ I replied.

‘Myra.’

‘You look great today, Myra. That blouse you’re wearing is from Topshop, right?’

‘Yeah, got lucky enough to get it for ten, great sale last week,’ Myra answered with a sort of pride and triumph, one experiences upon achieving great things, but it was highly incongruous over here.

Disgusting, I thought.

Who doesn’t love sales? We all undeniably do, but I would never deign to buy something for ten pounds and then go about, exultantly, announcing it here and there. I imagined this girl having a terrible inherent disposition to make public announcements without giving second thought to it. On the other hand, this bluntness could also indicate a serious congenital disorder. Either way, I was adamant on not befriending someone so preternaturally unable to think before speaking.

‘Well, Rachel, political science doesn’t start until 4 pm, so how about grabbing coffee and muffins?’

I wanted to say no, obviously she’ll go there and blatantly say, ‘She’s doesn’t speak English, so she’s struggling with communication, here’s her order.’

‘Umm, maybe some other time, I really don’t feel like going.’

‘Please, Rachel, you know I really don’t have any friends here. I just wanna talk to somebody, and since I’ve already had a sort of drama with you so.’

I wanted to obstinately go on to refuse, but the innocent look she gave me really made me feel sorry for her. Plus I did owe her this, so I reluctantly agreed.

‘Great. There’s a café known as Ninth Pantry, just ten minutes away, we’ll go there.’

‘Sounds good,’ was the only thing I managed to say.

It had started to drizzle slightly when we arrived. I paid for two coffees, black for her and an Almond milk latte for me, with two Chocolate brownies. She insisted on paying, but considering the ten pound shirt, I couldn’t trouble my conscience by accepting a pricey treat from someone already near absolute impecunity.

We grabbed our coffees and settled on a table in the corner.

‘Where are you from?’ I asked.

‘I grew up in Lancashire, but my parents are originally from Pakistan.’

‘Oh wow, I had a friend named Zoya, back in high school. She was from Pakistan too. She used to be my best buddy, we’d do all kinds of nasty stuff together.’

At this, she merely laughed, but the conversation was getting incredibly aimless and dry, so I decided to change the subject.

‘By the way, what made you take up Philosophy? You seem like the English literature and drama type.’

‘How true, Rachel! I took A-Level English and guess what? I really managed to get an A, and I was almost resolute on becoming an English professor, but there’s a visceral force that’s pushing me to give Philosophy a try.’

‘Well, that means we’ll be seeing each other often.’

‘Yes, plus I hope you’re aware philosophy isn’t the only mutually shared lecture, I’ve got political science too. I’m on cloud nine,’ cried Myra.

‘What! No! This can’t be possible. How in the world are we going to tolerate each other during PS. No way, I’m dropping out tomorrow.’

I shrieked with intense fury, almost indignation, at someone being conniving enough to keep a close check on your activities and then making maximum efforts to _____ emulate you.

‘Oh my God, Rach, chill out a bit. I wasn’t expecting this reaction at all. I’ve met you twice, and I already like you. Just try to make good talk and trust me I’ll be your next best buddy,’ she replied with a casually cool nonchalance, that, to me, was a callous disregard of one’s feelings.

Plus wait, did she actually say ‘Rach’ instead of ‘Rachel’, or I didn’t clean my ears properly? No, the sound was resoundingly ‘CHH’ at the end.

Is she mad? How can someone get so candid at the second meeting? I thought. She talked with an outlandish frankness that made me think she was either diagnosed with a serious mental disorder or was

helplessly in need of a friend- it was the need that was compelling her to act flamboyantly, and she was not aware of the fact that, this struck others as sheer idiosyncrasy.

I wasn't done making these mental notes when she took out her cellphone, which I noticed wasn't a flashy iPhone common on campus, but some obsolete, used, unmistakably worn out android model. I really did feel sorry for her.

'Hey, Rach, smile.'

I did manage to produce a grin but deep down inside there was this incipient feeling that I was at the wrong place, with an inane person, and doing the entirely wrong thing; if I didn't get up and run away, I would inevitably become deranged.

2. The First Deception

Though, Thomas and I, had a pretty steady relationship during high school, beginning somewhere near the end of year 10, that scoundrel didn't hesitate once while breaking up with me. It was during the summer we were done with our A-levels, he came to me and frivolously announced it was time to break up. He said that since he was moving up north to Edinburgh University, and I was to be in London, it wouldn't be very practical to practice 'long distance'. You would expect me to start wailing like one of those quintessential clingy girlfriends, but I was too glam to give a damn.

I admit that for a fleeting second I was nonplussed- for what kind of rascal would leave a girl like me? It wasn't just about me, but all the endless benefits that accompanied dating me. He simply couldn't deny the tremendous amount of favors I had given him. How could he not admit that he spent every second night studying in my bedroom just to escape the clamor of his own stingy, saturated little dwelling?

How could he deny the fact, that I shared my pocket money with him because I was simply too merciful to refuse a hand to mouth beggar like him . Adding one last thing to the list, he spent his summers extraordinarily, which in retrospect, he shouldn't have. Dad was generous enough to offer him to accompany us, every summer, to picturesque vacation resorts, despite mum's disapproval. He, nevertheless, showed the inconsiderate part of himself with an

unceremonious breakup. However, never have I ever been more relieved in my life. Breaking up meant I no longer had to bear his always unpleasant breath, or the constant criticisms of how little I worked in comparison to him, but still achieved an equal footing by getting into a reputable university.

Therefore, after the breakup, I decided to head to Florence to make life take a bit of a desultory turn. Well, not exactly desultory, because I spent the summer teaching English at a primary school in Florence. Plus, I was ruefully single at that time. Seeing passionate lovers kissing, fondling, and cuddling did nothing but to remind me of how banal every single

thing seemed for those without someone to fawn over them.

Sometimes, I think this ostentatious public display of affection comes more from the desire to fill others with envy than from actual feelings for your better half. Even if someone wants to eat their partner alive, they are going to swoon in public to an extent where you feel you're the only one with an intrinsic incapability to give love and vice versa.

I can never forget the embarrassment I had to face back during my time in Florence. One night towards the end of July, I was walking back to my one-bedroom apartment when this tall Italian guy came running after me. He looked like the hero of a romantic movie, with shoulder-length black hair, perfectly tanned skin, chiseled features, a narrow pointed nose, and a jawline so sharp that it could cut through a thousand solitaires. Anyway, he said he'd seen me walking there yesterday and asked if I'd like to have dinner with him.

I was enchanted at the idea- for I could take intimate pictures and send them to my jealous bitchy group of my friends or Thomas, and let them all smolder inside.

This guy named Armani had to pick me up from my apartment around six in the afternoon. The room I was living in was the worst form of dwelling ever made for any sanely functioning human to live in. Not only were the walls cracked and cleaved, with numerous crevices home to all kinds of spiders and beetles, but the pipes were leaking, doors creaking, and electrical sockets on the verge of catching fire.

I, therefore, requested the occupants of my adjacent room if I could use their washroom to get ready. Taking hold of my knee length silk dress, stilettos, and make up bag, I knocked at their door. A middle-aged, fiftyish something, woman appeared. From behind her, I could see an equally aged, plump man lying naked on the bed.

‘Ciao, is it possible for me to use your washroom really quick? I’m actually running late and trust me you can’t even stand in my room, please.’

Assessing the current situation, I understood this grumpy old couple was in the midst of something fiercely passionate that explained the groans and squeaking sounds, which I thought were coming from a cat in labor. I regretted asking, because I already knew the answer, but the woman in a compassionate voice, _____ which belied the seething irascibility, answered,

‘Well, there’s a hotel just across the street. They’ll let you use their washroom.’

‘Grazie.’

‘Perdersi brutta puttana,’ was the reply.

I was able to understand familiar words, but what the woman said was completely unintelligible, and the way it was said suggested it could be nothing more than a profanity. The need to google translate simply didn’t arise because an Italian man standing in the corridor sniggered,

‘SHE SAID GET LOST, YOU NASTY BITCH.’ I didn’t mind because her vexation was fully justified.

Armani picked me up around six . I was expecting a respectable car parked outside to take us to our destination, but there was nothing. Instead, taking hold of my hand, he started to walk, forcing me to trudge with him too. At first, I decided it was better not to say anything that might cause umbrage, but this endless trek was becoming increasingly gruesome, and he clearly had no intention of stop walking. So I asked a bit curtly,

‘Seriously, couldn’t you find someone else to embark on this self-torment mission with you? I didn’t sign up for the weight loss program you’re on!

I spat out those words with so much incision that he gave me a long doleful look.

‘I don’t realize this is so much of an agony to you,’ he said in his heavy, ear pricking Italian accent.

‘Since the weather is beautiful, I think of it more as a... umm... what do you English people call it? A word similar to pomegranate.’

‘Promenade, Armani. It’s a leisurely walk.’

I was proud of myself for spontaneously coming up with the word, for I was terrible at memorizing words and even worst at using them correctly, at the right occasion. My quick response to this Italian’s conundrum certainly did help make my frequently used statement, ‘I’m British,’ more credible, as one in ten Italians were ready to believe that I was English. This, I suspect, was maybe because of a lack of sophistication or perceived reservation. Well, to be honest, no matter how reserved

the world perceives English people to be, I believe, no desire, action, thought and feeling should remain inhibited.

‘Dear Rachel, if you don’t mind I can borrow my cousin’s scooter, as we are passing his apartment, and then we may very happily scoot down to our dinner place.’

Scoot down? Was he in his senses? He damn wasn’t, otherwise how could he make me ride a fucking scooter with 3-inch heels on? By now, I was sure, he had either escaped from an asylum or was highly tipsy, for no respectable person would make his date a laughingstock. The idea was preposterous, ludicrous, and imbecile — as many words you can think of to describe an idea proposed by a maniac. God had blessed this man with beauty but no brains, and I was already at the end of my tether, so the best option was to run back home to the comfort of my tawdry room.

‘Armani, it’s been nice meeting you, but I’ve really got a lot of work to do, so I better get going.’

‘Miss Rachel, I think I have enrage you.’

‘No you have done nothing wrong. I’m just exhausted already.’

‘But we’re almost there, and I insist you try Bozeman’s Bolognese.’

‘Alright, but only if you promise me to call a taxi or whatever on our way back.’

‘Sicuro.’

Dinner was undeniably good. Red wine and Bolognese had certainly helped get out of that grumpy, morose mood, and I was thinking of suggesting 'walking back' to some hotel room. Apparently, this man had a bizarre predilection for trudging long distances, but considering the costly dinner he was going to pay for, I decided to compromise the comfort of a taxi.

'Rachel, me going to the bathroom I'll be right back.'

'Yeah, sure,' I smiled.

The washroom trip seemed like a trip to another continent, and I was getting increasingly suspicious, but before I could go check on him, the waiter came and handed me a note saying,

'Miss Rachel, thank you for a splendid meal. Enjoyed a night out after so long. Generous of you for feeding a _____ poor man. Now I must return to my wife and kids.

NOTE: PLEASE REMEMBER TO PAY FOR THE EXTRA DISHES I GOT PACKED FOR MY FAMILY.'

The waiter then came and placed a two hundred euro check on the table. I was done now. It was time to go back home.

3. A small lie

The week following our introductory sessions, passed in a blur of nerve wracking and gruesome activities. Assignments, presentations, finalization of classes, and the dorm- settlement process cascaded into our lives with the intensity of fast flowing water gushing down a slope; I was certain it was metamorphosing our

perfectly functioning brains, to something I'd describe as torpid meat boxes.

During my first week at university, I had judiciously categorized the students into two groups. The first being those rich babes, who were heedless of whatever was going on in class, and did nothing except for planning summer trips with their boyfriends/ girlfriends. This group could very easily afford to adopt a nonchalant attitude, because they knew their parents' were loaded; therefore, they continued to load their children and this sheer process of incessant loading continued until an unexpected calamity sprang up, and they were deprived of their fortunes. In that case, those rich fellows had prudently arranged for backups to ensure the flow of wealth didn't come to an abrupt halt. These backups included even wealthier grandparents, both, maternal and paternal, who doted on their grandchildren to an extent where they had already set aside, imperceptibly vast sums of money for them.

This group, thus, roamed around lackadaisically, partying and joking, and mimicking the other group pummeled by life's blows. The second group, I'd say, was fish that has been recently deprived of water. As one might expect, the fish starts contorting its body grotesquely, squirming and throwing itself in a series of quick, frantic movements. Similar to convulsions, was the attitude of these students, who could always be seen around campus, deliriously pacing here and there, and constantly badgering professors to know whether they got an A on their latest assignment.

I'm wasn't quite able to discern what exactly provoked this abnormal behavior, maybe it was inherent desire to succeed, which had been escalated by their parents' constant threat to cut them off if they came anywhere near to failure. Or the fuelling force was absolute wretchedness and financial constraint. Either way, I felt sorry for them for deliberately denying themselves the luxury of relaxing and partying.

But at the same time I rendered this group despicable for making me feel like an absolute failure. It gave me acute anxiety to see these students running after professors, three weeks before deadlines, to check whether their work was up to the mark (which it certainly was). I, on the other hand, wouldn't deign to open an assignment, any time before the last few hours. Then I would hastily complete my work, copying and pasting paragraphs from other students' work, all the while wailing and vowing to spend less time watching Netflix, and cleaning chocolate mousse tubs. I wondered which group, did I belong to.

I was certainly not water deprived fish, but neither was I a careless party animal. Having grown up in a respectable family of lawyers, where money was never an issue, there was hardly anything my parents couldn't get for me, but at the same time they continuously reiterated upon the importance of studying. Being renowned lawyers in Guilford, academically incompetent children would tarnish their name and bring social stigma. Therefore, from a very young age my brother and I were encouraged to study. Alex took my parents' reprimands and warnings way

too seriously, and perhaps, that's why he ended up at Cambridge. I, on the other hand, was studious, but preferred to go at my own pace, rather than adopting the expeditious and conscientious work ethic my parents expected.

However, after starting university, I allowed myself to dissolve slightly, becoming a part of the first group, whose exclusive membership I wholly enjoyed. The having fun/ partying disposition was actually something I should have been worried about, because it wasn't wholeheartedly welcomed by my parents; they often gave me warning signs, by delaying my monthly maintenance checks, or by telling me to curb my expenses, in addition to alluding to my- I admit- overly priced clothes and handbags. Back then, the thought of becoming independent by getting a job at a coffee shop or so had crossed my mind, but that meant I could no longer afford to live in upscale London or shop designer. Therefore, the best way out was to become a drama queen, effectively switching between the diligent student role and the real party animal, I was gradually morphing into.

Myra, I'm damn sure, wasn't party to any. I could clearly see, she was way too busy sticking her nose in other people's businesses to pay any attention to studies, but neither was she the Mummy- Daddy's money type, which was quite conspicuous by the ten pound shirt, and unacceptable (by Rachel standards) android phone. Well, who even wanted to know which category she belonged too? I'd been away from that

vicious woman's malicious gaze and wicked laugh, and that's what really mattered.

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About three weeks before the start of fall session, my family, including my grandparents, had driven all the way from Guilford, to settle me in my new apartment. I'd robustly objected to the idea of the extended family involvement, having reasonably suggested the futility in undertaking a one-hour journey. But no, they weren't willing to leave me alone. I desperately needed to just go away and start a new life; and every time I would talk about becoming independent, grandma would pinch my cheek and say, 'My chubby little bee is going to be all alone in that big city'.

I requested Alex, who about to leave for his final year at Cambridge, to drop me on his way, but dad said

'Rachel, we're all coming, and it's final. Don't worry, it's not like we'll start living with you.'

When we arrived at the apartment- Dad had purchased for I don't know how many millions- I received the biggest shock of my life. My high school enemy, and lifelong foe, stood right in front of me, in a pair of denim shorts and a flimsy black blouse that barely contained her busty breasts.

'Becca,' I spat out.

'What the hell are you doing here? Didn't you destroy my high school years enough that you came chasing me all the way here?'

I simply couldn't believe my eyes. The girl who had stolen every single boy who ever loved me, and spared no effort to disparage my looks in front of my peers, stood there smirking at me. Just because I was a bit overweight, had frequent breakouts, didn't have huge water jugs like her, and was a complete bookworm, she had made my life a living hell. I was in London now, and a change of place demanded a change of people, so I couldn't allow her to enter my life again.

'Rachel! Is that the way to talk to people? Becca's parents couldn't find a reasonable dwelling because of this over saturation problem, so they consulted us. We were the ones to suggest getting an apartment adjacent to yours. Isn't it fantastic? You both will be together,' mum said.

'Mum, you have absolutely no idea what a big mess you've made.'

'Come on, Rachel, I thought you'd left your peevish disposition back in high school. Plus, we'll be at the same university, so I'll be seeing you even more,' sneered Becca.

'Jesus, have mercy on me,' I muttered to myself.

I'd rapturously left behind all those people, who had spared no effort in ensuring high school became a nightmare for me. Leaving high school and moving to London came as a huge relief. But perhaps this relief had been so overwhelming, that in my unwitting mindlessness, I had left a trace of some extremely powerful fluid that had given birth to a trajectory which was easy for this loathsome 'Becca' to follow. I knew, I

either had to find someone to help me throw out this detestable woman from my life, or prepare myself for the worst to come.

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A three-week-long summer exchange program ensued the week following the start of November. Students from the U.S, Canada, and other European universities sauntered around campus, with expectant smiles painted on their faces. The most hardworking amongst our class, which, surprisingly, included Myra, were selected to show these foreign students around campus. I'd been so astounded when professor referred Myra 'as one of the most suitable candidates to carry out the intricate process of guiding foreign students' that I wanted to shout in his that he'd better expect to be pertinent rather than pleased, after his diligent Myra———messed up everything.

It's not that I'm said this out of jealousy or enrage at not being selected. I had never wanted to carry out that task anyway. It required a hell lot of patience, knowledge, devotion, and time, nothing of which I was willing to acquire or sacrifice. On the contrary, my indignation stemmed from a much deeper concern: foolhardy and disparaging students should not be given opportunities. Myra was a walking example of these two traits.

Then one day, catching sight of her ambling with a group of male students apparently from Eastern Europe, I walked towards her to see for myself whether she really was carrying out the given task with

assiduity. I expected to catch her out of the blue, doing something that was more characteristic of her: getting as candid, and maybe, coquettish as possible.

‘Hi, Myra, how’s the explaining going?’ I smirked.

‘Yeah it’s good. Most of them don’t get what I’m saying, so that’s kind of an issue.’

‘They can’t understand English or your vocabulary isn’t vast enough to articulate appropriate responses?’

‘Very funny, Rachel.’

‘Wait, what? You think I’m joking. It’s a real question.’

‘Well then the REAL answer to your REAL question is that my level of proficiency surpasses their ability to comprehend, and that’s large enough to be a problem,’ she retorted, clearly vexed.

Honestly speaking, I had never expected such a curt reply from her. From our previous encounters, I was the one to give tart replies, and she, out of good will, used to ignore my churlish answers. Then she’d take the conversation elsewhere, to prevent either of us from falling below accepted standards of lingual decency and start hurling profanities towards each other.

It must be the heat that’s gotten inside her head, I thought, or these dullard Polish chaps actually can’t understand English. Whatever the reason maybe, she looked pitifully exhausted, and I felt a tinge of sympathy- not for her, obviously-but for those students who had to tolerate her. They were understandably wonderstruck by London: its student population and

diversity, and the constant hustle and bustle that consumed all areas within university proximity.

‘Look, I know the weather’s crazy hot today so why don’t you just go and grab a cold coffee or so, and leave me, albeit not as responsible as you, to take care of these lads?’

‘Are you sure, Rachel? I don’t want to create problems for you.’

‘Nah. Don’t worry at all. We’ll be just fine,’ I replied, shooting a curious look at one of the older boys.

‘Alright then. I’ll be back in ten. You want something from Starbucks?’

Oh, so she is really the Starbucks type, I thought. Another enormous disappointment. I thought of her as the Costa type, the ones who are genuine coffee lovers. I have always considered Costa Coffee lovers, to be the only coffee drinkers on the face of this blue and green planet who harbor a true love for coffee. These drinkers, without counterfeit, rush to grab a cup of pure, dark, and unadulterated coffee every morning to satisfy the caffeine addiction that cuts right through them like any drug would. Well, don’t take me the wrong way. I’m not scathing the Starbucks fans; it’s just that drinking something so extravagant defiles your loyalty to strong and dark caffeinated water.

‘No, nothing at all. Thanks for asking,’ I replied.

As Myra walked away, I turned towards the group of apparently- imbecile students, who were staring at me intently. They began to whisper amongst themselves,

which I was sure was some horrendous talk about me. I have never heard anyone talk pleasantly about me, for people always find me either too astute or ostentatious. These are the two adjectives, people have repeatedly used, either to my face or behind my back, to give voice to their opinions.

Recalling past examples of professors saying 'Rachel stop being so pretentious all the time, you know, your latest thesis is what I call pure plagiarism', or my aunts' pejoratives, 'look at your hair', 'look at your dress, too short and all frayed'- the stakes of those boys' expressing contempt were simply too high. If I couldn't understand the language they were speaking, I was determined to prevent them from speaking it at all. In an attempt to shift the language- to one mutually understandable- I asked them, 'How's been your experience so far?'

The expression they unanimously gave me, was so blank and banal, that, for a fleeting second, I considered spitting in their faces, just for the sake of bringing back some expression, even if it resulted in disgust or escalated contempt.

After a good thirty-second zombie look, one of them managed to utter, 'Yes, I'm very educated'.

At this, I simply couldn't control my laughter. I laughed so hard and for so long, that clearly affronted by my lack of manners, they turned and started to walk away.

Shit! I muttered.

I hadn't thought about the fact that Myra's golden reputation would plummet into the same dark abyss that contained mine. By simply letting them walk away, full of umbrage taken at a small involuntary chuckle, I would prove that I really was the churlish and envious witch, Myra suspected me to be. Running after them as fast as I could, I stopped them midway and abjectly apologized for my behavior. Now, I'm giggling while writing this, that when I apologized, one of them took out his phone, and read something from Google Translate. Now, whether google misinterpreted what they actually meant to say in polish, or they were trying to be a bit witty, the answer Google Translate read was,

MY GRACIOUS QUEEN, SORRY FOR WALKING AWAY,
YOUR WORDS MEAN THE WORLD TO US.

My reaction to those words was something very justified and understandable. I won't waste time describing what I did when I heard those words. However, I'll would like you to know, that, in the ensuing round of guffawing, my body threw itself in a series of overwhelming jerking convulsions; By the time I had regained consciousness, those students had left, and pedestrians were gathering books which had flung from my hand and were sprawled across the sidewalk. I did, however, discover one talent that I undeniably excelled at. And that was, inadvertently attracting large audiences.



By the time Myra returned, with an extra-large iced coffee and brownie in the other hand, I had already

come up with a plausible excuse. I thought of starting with something like 'whilst I was explaining the university's diverse programs, they got an urgent call, so they had to rush'. I just hoped she'd fall for it, otherwise I was in hot water.

Furthermore, I quickly calculated the ramifications of the truth being out. Myra's well established reputation would shatter into a million shards, and she'd swear revenge, either by debasing me in class or by plotting my murder. Nay, her mind isn't that depraved, I thought. Maybe she'd team up with my lifelong enemy and newfound neighbor, and that was a problem. A real problem. A deadly problem, indeed.

My brooding wasn't going to come to an end if I hadn't caught sight of her tall, sleek figure approaching. The comestibles in her hands struck me. How profligate, I thought. Must have cost more than 10 pounds, and I had been worrying about her financial situation since day one.

'Everything fine? You look so pale,' she asked. Bitch, I muttered. There she was devouring a brownie and iced coffee, whereas I had been fretting about a group of foolish boys. Her behavior was absolutely beyond the pale. But then I remembered that I had been the one to tell her to go freshen up, though she had been reluctant. I had poured boiling water- no not water- oil, yes I had poured boiling oil on myself, so I was the one to be blamed.

'I think I just started my period. Odd timing, never knocks on the door before coming,' I said.

‘Oh, I’m incredibly sorry for making you wait, you know Starbucks and its queues.’

Starbucks, Starbucks, Starbucks! I just wanted to run away now. I couldn’t stand her blissfully happy face, with chocolate smudged all over it. Good thing! I thought. Let her eat, cause the more on the lips, the more on the hips! It was extremely gratifying to see her take in that toxin that would so magically, yet intangibly, deform her perfect supermodel figure.

‘Alright, Myra, better rush back. These cramps are going to leave me absolutely knackered.’

‘Yeah, sure, but Rachel, wait....where are the...? And before she could say anything further, I had my pile of books in one hand and bag in the other. Then I started running as fast as I could to the safety of my apartment, oblivious of the pedestrians uttering profanities as I knocked them on my way, and of the nefarious plans of my second foe, whom I was yet to deal with.

4. Wear and Then Tear.

It had been a week since that lying-to-Myra’s face and running of incident, and her sudden disappearance was turning me into a bundle of nerves. It wasn’t her wrath or irascibility that was bothering me, but I feared she might be conspiring something malicious to cause public humiliation. Plus, when I reached my apartment, after that period excuse runaway, I found something that ignited the fire already smoldering inside me.

My beautiful, angelic friend Becca was standing in my kitchen, rummaging through the contents of my fridge.

‘What the hell are you doing here?’

‘Hey, you’ve got any ice cream in here?’

‘Becca! Get out right now,’ I bellowed at the top of my voice.

‘Bro, you got blueberry but I like Oreo. How can you forget that?’

She snickered, and gave her usual devilish smile, that made me fume more fiercely.

‘And yes, your mum gave me your apartment’s key. She told me how dangerously reckless you can be sometimes, and how apprehensive she gets. For example, the day you locked your house with the key _____ lying inside, and then your poor family had to wait outside for a good two hours. This happened back in Italy, right?’

I was nonplussed.

I remember trying to mutter something, but the words simply wouldn’t come out. How could someone, already characterized by the lowest standards of self-esteem, fall so pathetically below what was already abominable? By prattling at length, when it was obvious that I didn’t have the least interest in even looking at her revulsion- triggering face, she was debasing herself, not me.

‘Can you please leave my apartment?’ I requested in a surprisingly calm and unruffled voice.

She started laughing rowdily, in an impossibly lunatic way, and then said,

‘You take things way too seriously, Rachel. You can’t survive like this.’

‘Well, in that case, you’d be the happiest girl alive’.

‘That’s not a nice thing to say, is it, my love? Few lucky fellows have a friend like you.’

I could no longer stand the sight of her lips curling up, and her perfect set of white teeth showing, whenever she looked at me. Thus, I, once again, picked up my books and walked out, slamming the door shut behind me, and noting to throw away all groceries she had touched. I thought of ringing mum and telling her, that she got the wrong flavor of ice cream, since the bitch she unbelievably fawned over, liked Oreo not _____ Blueberry.



My skepticism of Myra concocting ways to bring me down, proved to be nothing more than unnecessary misuse of the human mind; It wasn’t long before I found a small note tucked beneath my lecture notes, that read:

WE’RE HAVING A PARTY TO SAY GOODBYE TO THE EXCHANGE STUDENTS. FINALLYYY. LOUSYY TIME. I REALLY WANT YOU TO ATTEND. WILLIAM’S HALL. SATURDAY NIGHT. 7PM. SEE YOU THERE. LOTS TO TALK ABOUT. X, MYRA.

Something was definitely wrong with me. I beamed so hard that my cheeks began to hurt. I certainly wasn’t

expecting this reaction from myself and was even more surprised to find myself thinking about all the respectable dresses I owned. I never intended to befriend this girl , who had a baffling effect on me, and now I was on cloud nine because I'd, unexpectedly, received an invitation from her. It must be some sort of hormonal disorder, or malfunctioning of the emotion glands, if they even are a thing, I reasoned with myself. The truth was, I really didn't care what was behind this sudden rapture, what I was really concerned about was, that, I had no time to waste because I wanted to look my best for the party.



The party was to begin on Saturday evening, 7 pm. Now, I had to deal with the greatest conundrum ever, that was, what to wear? I laid out all the dresses on the bed and contemplated the best option. I wanted to look classy, but also stay within the limits of decency. That is what I thought would win Myra's approval, for I had rarely seen her wearing something that exposed beyond discretion. The desire to impress Myra, escalated with a dizzying sensation, until the only thing on my mind was to leave her in absolute awe of everything about me.

It was, in retrospect, a pathological obsession that was likely to result in disillusionment about the whole ideal of friendship. Maybe, since my greatest enemy was in living in unbelievable proximity, I was forced to seek refuge in the snake that stung a little less. Perhaps, the unrelenting determination to protect myself from complete wreckage was forcing me to fortify myself

with the barrier Myra would provide. Going by this reasoning, there meant one thing that no part of me was willing to accept; It meant that I was weak, vulnerable, and diffident- the kind that is easily and frequently assailed, by anyone, anywhere, and anytime. My mind robustly opposed any such incipient vulnerability, but at a subconscious level, I fully accepted that I was thoroughly fragile, just like the lowest quality glass, that once dropped, irrevocably breaks into infinite shards. Notwithstanding, the issue of dress selection was still on my mind. Since losing several pounds during the summer of Year 13, my obsession to fit into short, above knee-length dresses had increased, the result of which was an incremental transformation in my mostly baggy, oversized, and drooping attire. What replaced the latter was outrageously revealing; an attire ranging from backless to strapless to shameless. One thing was for sure- I had to get myself a new dress, a piece of covering perfectly apposite for the occasion. I checked my bank balance that was less than a thousand pound. Had dad forgotten to make the transaction? Was this some kind of revenge for misbehavior in the past? Was my family actually broke?

In that case, I'm ashamed to admit, the first thing that came to my mind was being deprived of everyday sushi dinners, daily Tesco Extra groceries, my upscale London residence. There would have been other ramifications, of course, like my family having to skip meals or shifting from their bungalow to a stinky little cottage, but that did not bother me at all.

Perhaps, the certitude of never ever being part of any familial wretchedness, if experienced in the future- the thought of my mum living in a two-bedroom cottage instead of a ten bedroom bungalow, and dad having to eat one bagel in the morning instead of his usual three- left me perfectly unruffled. But then I snapped my mind to stop over exercising. I seriously needed to work on curbing those thoughts, otherwise I would have actually started believing that my family was near absolute poverty, which would, inevitably, lead to a self-torture, that is a beautiful euphemism for 'compromising your luxuries'.

The best way out was to call mum and check what in the world was stopping my dad from fulfilling his duty towards me? I rang mum for the fifth time, and when they still didn't pick up, I called Alex.

'Hey Sis.'

'Alex, I need you to answer my question real quick.'

'Looks like you couldn't have sushi last night.'

'Yeah, something like that. Did dad give you this month's allowance?'

'Yep, received the transaction last night.'

'Wait. What's wrong?'

'Mum and dad are planning some filthy shit here. They didn't load me this month.'

'Well, I'll define that as revenge for disrespecting Uncle Jake last Christmas.'

'God, Alex! Cut it out. It happened last year.'

‘But Christmas is coming, so they thought about teaching you a lesson, so that you learn to show some respect this time.’

‘Nah. Impossible.’

‘Believe it or not, but it’s the truth.’

‘Alex, do you even realize I’ve got actual shit frozen inside my rectum. You have no idea how grave the situation is. I’ve got a pretty important party to attend and nothing to wear. You’ll be seeing your sis living at the mercy of thrift shops! That’s what you want, Alex? You want me to wear clothes reeking of strangers’ sweat?

Silence. I had succeeded. The subterfuge of genuine suffering had moved my sentimental brother’s heart. My voice was resoundingly helpless, and now I was _____ certain a transaction was inevitable, the only difference was a change of sender. Why didn’t I opt for drama school? Better change my major if upcoming grades don’t even meet my lowest expectations, I noted.

‘Alex? Hello? You still there?’

‘Listen, Rachel, I can wire five hundred but how soon can you return it?’

What was wrong with Alex? I didn’t remember him as a penny-pinching Scrooge. Was this his girlfriend’s brainwashing, who I bet lived frugally all her life and was turning my brother into a miserly slot? I had to find out.

‘Alex, firstly, five hundred is nothing. I’m not enrolled in some budgeting program, okay? I’ve never bought a

dress less than 1000 pounds. Secondly, I've been barking for the past ten minutes that I'm broke, and you still expect me to give it back?' I bellowed.

Shit. Too much had been said, and I could feel Alex was at the end of his tether. I was expecting a discipline ingraining or 'curbing yourself' harangue, but he calmly answered,

'Rachel, it's the best I've got to offer. If it doesn't suit you, then look for another solution. Text me if you change your mind.' With this he hung up.

My brother had changed, but this change was transient. His cheap girlfriend Jennifer- who apparently had an obnoxious effect on him- had to start counting her days. The first option had been dismissed, so now I had to take the bull by the horns and confront mum. Thankfully, mum called shortly afterwards.

'Hi, sweetie. How's uni going?'

'Umm, mum, I have to ask you something.'

'Go ahead sweetie.'

'Mum, did dad, by chance, forget to transfer money this month? I've got no hurry, but was a little concerned whether everything is alright there.'

I asked trying to feign in as much concern and care that was possible.

'Yes, sweetie, everything's perfect. In fact, we are in Paris right now for a meeting. And yes, regarding your allowance, we both decided that it wouldn't be required

this month, since we already gave an extra two thousand last month, didn't we?

'Yes, mum, but I thought it was for settling down and all, wasn't it?

'Honey, you got a fully furnished apartment with the year's bills already paid. We took care of almost everything, so what kind of settling down are you referring to?'

Two realizations hit me like anything. Firstly, the extra money I thought they had- so graciously and generously- given for a little treat, was actually the following month's allowance. Why didn't they tell me they had vowed to keep their only daughter deprived of such trivial, effortless joys. I had wasted no time in upgrading my iPhone from an X to an 11. Little did I know that I had been ensnared in my parents' sinister plot: to put my self-control to test to see if I actually managed to not give into my smoldering desires.

Perhaps, if they had used the tongues- God had so magnanimously blessed them with- at the right place, and at the right time, they would have saved me from the predicament I was in.

'Oh, yeah, mum. How can I forget? I've got that money saved. Anyway, I have to go so talk to later. Take care.'

Wise people say we shouldn't be tenaciously attached to our predilections, and it was this day that I actually got hold of its meaning. I had to pay the price of my massive splurges, and now to prevent further chagrin, the current situation demanded great prudence. Here's

the thing; it was time to grab one of my designer dresses and head to the most respectable thrift shop I could find.



Dressed up in a twenty pound, navy blue gown with black heels, I made my way to William's hall at quarter to 7. It seemed as if everybody was intent on making me feel how single I was., As far as the eye could see, girls giggled with their arms locked with their boyfriends', who in turn, passed coquettish smiles to indicate God knows what.

All of this seemed absolutely ridiculous. What did these preposterously enchanting men, dressed in black, silk embellished tuxedos, holding white wine glasses want to prove? Among those girls going giddy, after a single male smile, was Becca. She stood there wearing an extremely low neck spaghetti dress, which exposed not only her entire cleavage, but also the hair she'd forgotten to shave off her chest. The quantum physics experts didn't even deign to look her away, obviously the sheer fact of being the most intellectual students made them superior. That rightly explained their heedless attitude to that little cunt and her voluptuous figure, which she endlessly tried to accentuate to get their attention. Serves her right, I thought.

Just then, someone put a gentle hand on my shoulder. I turned around to find Myra beaming like she had found her long-lost mother or something. Why was she so excited to see me? Was she going through the same situation as me? Or she had simply caught me grinning

at her text message with my perfect set of imperfect, crooked teeth and was trying to reciprocate that reaction? Maybe she too desperately needed a friend, and discovered that the fulfillment of that need lay in me, so gave me a rather cloying smile to make the whole process of befriending easier.

‘I’m so glad you came. Honestly, I thought you’d never accept my invite.’

‘What? Why would you say that?’

‘Come on. Don’t act as if you don’t have the slightest idea what I’m talking about.’

Okay. That was rude. In fact, a blatant and brusque thing to say to someone’s face, especially after that flattering smile. Her facial expressions were still soft and warm, so I thought she either didn’t realize that_____ she didn’t sound as discreet as she intended to be or this was her natural way of saying things. I had no intention of engaging in another argument with her, so I decided to laugh it off. Yes, this time I wouldn’t make tremendous efforts to wash off the dust thrown at me, rather wash it off with a light sprinkle.

‘Hey, are you mad or something? Because I really don’t know what you’re trying to allude to.’

‘No, it’s just that you ran off that day, without saying anything. I thought you were mad because I made you wait so long and didn’t even bother to get coffee.’

What? I let out a sigh of relief and vexation at the same time. Number one: I was grateful she was still unaware of the real reason behind my running away.

Second: She considered me to be a sullen child who'd simply start sulking if she didn't get a coffee, that was firstly, so easily available, and secondly, so detestable. Again, the best way was to laugh it off.

'OMG NO. Please don't say that. You did offer, besides I don't really like Starbucks.'

'But still I feel awful. It looks so inconsiderate.'

'Forget it, Myra. I'm hungry so make up for your inconsiderate behavior by getting me one of those chocolate pastries,' I joked.

For a brief second, she looked at me quite seriously and was on the brink of apologizing, when someone hollered,

'Myra, come here quick!'

'I'll be back with your pastry. Gimme ten'

'Okay.'

Just then, Becca sauntered towards me. She stood extremely close, her fox eyes narrowing, while scrutinizing my dress and make up. I couldn't stand the fact that she was taller than me, and therefore could easily loom and give that threatening, ice-cold stare. I had a tenuous desire for Myra to be standing next to me, her six feet tall figure no match for Becca. It didn't seem right to take on an invincible look from the simple presence of others in the face of your worst enemy, but the idea of it was strangely comforting.

'You seem to be enjoying yourself a lot,' she scowled.

'Well, is that a problem?'

‘Absolutely, because you weren’t even invited to this party.’

‘Hell I was. In fact, the senior host herself invited me.’

She shot a murderous look in Myra’s direction.

‘Oh, so you’re friends with her.’

‘Sure I am.’

‘Rachel, you know what, these little tactics to protect yourself aren’t going to help at all. I’ll make your life a living hell that you’ll cry to return to high school.’

‘Do whatever you like. I don’t even give a fuck. Besides, I think you should start paying more attention to your body hair, especially when you go for these kinda dresses. Even the hair on your nipple are visible, Becca. For heaven’s sake, get a razor and if you don’t_____ have money, always remember I’m just one call away.’

She burned more furiously than a fire that rages uncontrollably, when supplied with an abundance of softwood. Her whole face went red, and it was clear she would either pull my hair out or launch herself on me. The effects of going berserk to this extent were going to be anything else except good, but I wasn’t worried. We were in a gathering, and the first she could do was to hurl a few insults or ambush me afterwards, which was something to be worried about, but I had come fully prepared.

‘So, Miss Becca, if you’re done please excuse me, I have to join my friend Myra,’ I smirked, trying to flare her temper as high as possible.

What happened next is something I believe, readers will have trouble accepting. Becca did provide irrefutable evidence of the fact that she was more depraved than everyone who knew her personally, said she was. As I turned around, she yanked down the zip at the back of my dress so forcefully, that the whole surrounding fabric tore apart, my dress loosened and dropped to my feet.

Yes, as you might imagine, I stood there, in front of two hundred people, as naked as the day I escaped my mother's womb. I don't know what made me put on a bra when I was getting dressed; I usually preferred to skip undergarments when I was going for gowns, but I was grateful because I had to endure a degree less embarrassment.

I wasn't expecting the reaction people gave me. I _____ mean, in the face of a similar situation, I'd never stand and gawk. I'd do whatever it took to save the person from mortification, even if it meant stripping off my own dress and wrapping it around the exposed person's body. However, everybody left whatever Goddamn business they were doing, and started to stare, with their mouths agape and hands pressed to their faces. I didn't really know how to react. Maybe I was so nonplussed that I couldn't muster the strength to cover up the body everybody was unabashedly leering at; or maybe I was thinking about a way to humiliate my rival, either by slapping her or by ripping her dress, too.

However, all the failed moments, when I was left completely impotent and vulnerable, whether it be back in high school or at home, formed a thick, opaque

layer in front of my eyes and blurred my vision completely. My head became dizzy with the ambush of ghastly old memories and wistful yearning for allowing myself to accept defeat. How many times had I failed? From being unable to compete with Alex in looks, academics, and friends to being assailed by everyone in high school, I was a complete waste. Yes, I did admit I was an absolute waste. If it weren't my parent's money and the unremitting threats to cut me off if I didn't get the required grades, I would have never made it to university. Instead, I'd be working in some forsaken pub, earning enough to afford two meals a day, which I now thought was a much better option. If I had been such a big failure in life, never living up to anyone's expectations, then there was absolutely no need to fear the worst. I stood there, dressed in a thin bra and underwear, looking at Becca ,who grinned with devilish contentment.

'If this is what gives you pleasure, I'll be happy to not put my dress on.'

'Rachel, my sweet little whore. You've got hair on your chest too. It's sad people don't look at themselves before complimenting others.'

I didn't have time to reply. In fact, before I could fabricate an equally caustic answer, Myra came marching forward, brusquely pushing aside the people who had shamelessly gravitated around us to entertain themselves with the ongoing drama. She was enraged- extremely enraged- as if she was the one whose clothes had been ripped.

‘Since I’m hosting this party, it’s my right to deal with those who violate the rules beyond decency or acceptance,’ she spat at Becca’s face.

‘What are you going to do? Cover her up with your own ridiculous piece of clothing.’

‘Sure, why not? But before that, there’s something even more important that needs to be done.’

With this being said, Myra went beyond my wildest imaginations. Even if I fully stretched my ability to envision horrendous things, I could have never pictured Myra doing what she did. Within in a fraction of a second, she grabbed the plunging neckline of Becca’s dress and hauled it downwards; the vehemence made the straps press into the skin of her shoulders, until they were detached, and the dress dropped to the floor, leaving behind nothing but bare breasts. If I had been complaining to God a few seconds ago for making fun of me, I was now grateful for his mercy- for I was wearing a bra, and she was not.

If we both were standing naked, I at least had my boobs covered, and that was enough for me. My disgrace and public humiliation was a lot less than hers, and that made joy burst inside me like a million fireworks. Tears began to fall from her eyes like raindrops rushing down a windowpane, and she, instinctively, grabbed her dress and wrapped it around her body, to prevent further unwanted display of her breasts. She couldn’t stand the discomfiture any longer, so she maneuvered her way through the people to make for the door.

I don't know why I stood there impassively instead of picking up my dress. Myra, however, impulsively covered me up and then embraced me. I couldn't feel anything, neither did I know how to respond, but I made a quick mental note of two facts that would change our lives tremendously. Number one, I had finally found the friend whom I was incessantly searching for. The girl who initially evoked great revulsion in every single part of me, and dealt with things with a bit too much candor, was the one who deserved to be called a friend. In fact, best friend. The seemingly perpetual quest for a soul mate had finally ended because she was standing right in front of me, her arms wrapped around my body so tightly, that I thought I might suffocate to death. The second realization, however, was quite disconcerting. I knew, Myra, was in great trouble. Having intervened under unsolicited conditions, and causing far greater mortification to the other party, she was bound to get an unimaginably severe punishment. I didn't give much thought to this, because the ensuing damage wouldn't be only hers; it would be our punishment because I couldn't let my newfound friend suffer alone.



Waiting for Alex seemed like an eternity. Though he wasn't that far away, and given that, he was provided with a Mercedes to spare him the trouble of public transport, the only plausible reason for not arriving on time was to inflame my frenzied condition. I would've never called him, but then there was simply no way out. After that clothes ripping scene, the student

services head called Myra to her office, saying that as the senior organizer of the party her behavior had been unacceptable, and that she would be solely responsible for the ramifications, which were severe. I tried to argue that she was the one being unreasonable by refusing to listen to the other side of the story, but that vicious little woman sympathetically listened to Becca's vindictive speech, and readily blamed Myra and me the entire incident.

I, of course, was declared the greatest culprit. I didn't really care what she thought of me, but I had to do something for the person who genuinely cared about me. What the student services called a reasonable punishment was highly unconscionable, as it required Myra to withdraw before the next semester. This meant she had until December to pack up her stuff and leave, but she simply couldn't afford to go, or she could? I wasn't quite able to discern her financial position yet, because of her apparent lack of willingness to disclose anything at all.

It was funny that a person, blessed with as much candor as her, gave into a subduing reticence when it came to divulging family matters. It wasn't like I was interested in knowing the salaries of her long buried ancestors- whose anatomical remnants must have already vanished underground- and neither did I ever ask her about the alimony payment her great-great-great grandmother received, if even ever had a divorce.

Still, whenever the conversation would come to her parents' professions, she would adeptly change the

topic. I never prodded with such matters, though her mercurial silence did nothing but to make me more curious. Anyway, I couldn't just let her boil in the oil I'd thrown her into, so Alex seemed the only possible way out. It took everything in me to pick up the phone and cajole him to come along with mum and dad, and put some sense into the dean's head.

Being a final-year law student at Cambridge, with a stellar academic record, captivating personality, and my parent's favorite child, he was the perfect person for getting our shit together.

'Alex, how are you?' I tried to sound as cloying as possible, but it was of no use because both, the speaker and listener, were equally disgusted.

'What do you want now, little sis? This was great. This was Alex's only trait that I truly admired. I was in awe of his other qualities as well, but the accompanying envy was simply too profound to ignore. With Alex, there was simply no need to bring in excessive flattery, even flattery at all, because he brought you straight to the point. Good for me, I thought. Saved me hours of intense self-loathing and revulsion, that would come in pangs and spasms afterwards, had I uttered a few more buttery words.'

'I've got poop all over me and I need you to help me clean it up.'

'See you at 4.'

I had already informed Myra of the way I intended to handle things, albeit she patently refused to be a part of such bribery.

‘For God’s sake, Myra! We aren’t bribing anybody here. It’s just an earnest request to see things in a different light and since they’re giving Becca a free out of jail pass, it’s time to take the matter by the horns.’

‘Rachel, you’re under the impression that the senior authorities are going to give in to your brother’s charisma. Things don’t work this way.’

‘Then how exactly do they work?’

‘I’m going to write an apology letter.’

At this, I laughed intractably. If Myra was offended, I really didn’t care. In fact, I wanted to ruffle her feathers this time. It was as if she had turned a blind eye to the fact that she was the one being affected by the student service’s decision, and I was doing everything for her. I’d already received my fair share of mortification by putting my breasts on display, which were probably seen by those polish morons I’d confronted earlier, and they must have made a great deal of fun.

‘Bitch has finally been brought to reckoning,’ they must have thought. Anyway, my point was that instead of criticizing my solution as a highly flawed one, she should display some gratitude and acknowledge my prudence (which I was sure she’d never do even for a new Prada bag).

‘I’m sorry for laughing like a maniac. I couldn’t control myself knowing that you’ve already sent five perfectly

written emails, with five others waiting in the draft section. Too bad that you're bad at subterfuge.'

'You opened my laptop, Rachel?' she bellowed, her balled up hands forcefully slamming the table.

'Easy there. I'll have to have breakfast on the couch, and I'm not getting my allowance until next month. And yes, my laptop's broken, so I used yours and accidentally came across the email notification. I swear I had no attention of going through your private stuff.'

'Unbelievable, Rachel! Unbelievable!'

'I don't see the need to shout. You know, I'm really not hard of hearing. Plus, I've got news. It looks as if the email you sent, abjectly apologizing for inappropriate behavior, was returned with a reiteration of the previously announced fact, which I think you're pretty _____ much familiar with.'

She looked at me in disbelief. Her jaw dropped a little too much, and her dark pupils expanded until they enveloped almost the whole of her Iris. Maybe she wanted to show how aghast she was, or make me discern the already known fact that a sane person couldn't converse with me for five minutes straight.

However, the expressions she gave me were so banal, faux, and thoroughly exaggerated, that the doubt of Myra being blessed with the ability to turn tables by making the other party guilty of unpleasant or foul conversation, now turned into a clearly established fact.

For the next fifteen minutes we sat around the kitchen counter, staring at each other, but not venturing to push the conversation beyond the boundaries that separated the profanity zone from that of linguistic decency. I miserably shot glances at the clock on the wall behind her, and at one point I was certain that Alex had no intention of coming, and we were just wasting our time. Coffee! Yes, coffee was the solution to everything. The only way to break the ice was to make her a cup of coffee.

‘Coffee?’

‘Sure, if it’s not a problem.’

‘Almond milk or oat milk?’

‘Oh, I take black.’

⁴⁹
I put in a precisely measured amount of coffee beans and set the machine into motion. While the coffee brewed, I took out two blueberry muffins I’d bought from Tesco, and heated them up in the microwave.

‘Rachel, don’t make one for me. I’ll only have coffee.’

Though I had heated up both of them for myself in the first place, her figure conscious behavior brought back the peevishness, I was trying so hard not to inhibit. What was she trying to prove? She was some Victoria’s Secret model that I clearly wasn’t? She really wanted to ruin my afternoon coffee by making me feel like an epicure. Black coffee and then no bonbon? Seriously? I remembered her devouring a brownie a few weeks ago and thought about accosting her for it, but then

dismissed the idea, taking her as an Anorexia Nervosa patient.

‘The other one’s for Alex,’ I replied.

‘Yeah right.’

I poured coffee into our mugs, but when I had to put milk and a spoonful of sugar into mine, I turned my back to her. Even the sight of such indulgence might give her a heart attack, I thought. Handing her the mug, I settled back on my stool, and began to shift morsels of blueberry muffin into my mouth. When I’d finished the first one, I changed my mind and devoured the second one too.

The sound of the door’s lock shifting woke me up exactly one hour later. I was so worn out, that despite having strong coffee, I drowsed on the living room_____ couch and then completely dozed off. Now, I woke to Alex hunkering down beside the couch, his hand gently placed on my cheek. He kissed the top of my head.

‘Are you sick, Rachel?’

‘Nope, just a bit knackered’ He looked at me anxiously for a moment. With his face really close, I studied my brother properly for a moment. He had transformed completely. Being naturally blessed with good looks and dad’s towering, six feet two inches tall figure, he had clearly worked pretty hard on himself. He was shaven, with his blond hair dyed a darker shade, his hair cut short and loosely settled in light, calm waves. Though he was wearing black chinos, a navy blue sweater, and a long black coat, I could see he had

spent hours in the gym building that fine pack of abs and replacing arm fat with strong muscle. With his broad shouldered, sturdy, and extremely tall figure, he looked like a duplicate of Hercules- I'd definitely dated him if he wasn't my brother. The thing I loved most about my brother was his hands. Nails clean and cut short, he had big hands, which were never seen without a wristwatch. Today, he was wearing the one I'd gifted him on his seventeenth birthday, from my very own salary.

'I haven't seen this one for a while,' I said pointing towards his watch.

'Yeah, I don't know why I just felt like wearing this today.'

I smiled and threw my arms around him. It was true, no matter how much I begrudged Alex for everything and vied for the same degree of appraisal and affection from my parents, Alex was the person I loved the most. He often treated my qualms and petty reservations frivolously, and that was because my worries were trivial, and I was in a habit of making a mountain out of a molehill. However, whenever I was in real danger, like the bullying back in high school for being overweight, he'd always protect me. And I loved him unconditionally for that.

'Hey, what took you so long? Plus, why didn't mum and dad come along?'

'Firstly, I had to drop my friend on the way, so sorry for being late. Secondly, mum and dad aren't aware of this predicament of yours.'

‘What? Alex, what was the point of calling you if you couldn’t bring mom and dad into this plan?’

‘Rachel, for heaven’s sake use your mind. Do you think our parents are going to help this friend of yours? All odds are stacked up against your friend, especially because the authorities have decided to absolve Becca.’

It was good to hear that Alex was fully aware of the entire issue; when I told him on the phone, I was so distraught that I could barely form any words, and I was sure he must have ignored me, thinking I was going through another garrulous prattling phase in my life. However, I was pleased to know that no matter how unintelligible I might have sounded back then, Alex had taken in everything and there was absolutely no need to fill him in. He was adorable in a million different_____ ways.

‘So do think you can manage all alone?’

‘Do we have another option?’

‘Alright. But give it your best. I want Myra out of trouble.’

‘You have my word, little sis.’

‘By the way, where is she? I haven’t even met the person who was audacious enough to avenge my sister’s humiliation.’

I had almost forgotten about Myra. I leapt into slumber so quickly and with such an overwhelming grogginess, I had no idea where she had disappeared.

‘The last time I saw her was in the kitchen, sipping black coffee.’

Alex walked towards the kitchen and returned with a little note in his hand. Was getting late for work so had to rush.

My shift ends at 6 45 pm. I’ll bring more muffins on my way because you accidentally had the last piece that was apparently saved for your brother. No problem. X Myra.

Alex read the note aloud and burst into laughter. Another achievement of her long mission to embarrass me, I thought. Well, her efforts made on the contrary, have certainly surpassed her mission, so no need to take umbrage, I thought.

‘What’s the story behind this?’ Alex asked, completely _____ amused.

‘Don’t ask. You’ve got no idea what a baffling person she is. It’s like she’s blessed with a tincture of all the irksome traits you’d least want in a friend.’

‘Really? I thought you really like her.’

‘I do. But she baffles me all the time.’

‘Seems like an interesting person. Witty and bold, apparently,’ he replied.

‘Rachel, why don’t you invite her for dinner? We’ll get to discuss the whole issue at hand. It’s five thirty already. I’ll go grab Chinese.’

I gave Alex a long agonizing look. The anguish was natural- it sprang somewhere from inside, without a

reason. There were a thousand different things going on my mind, and the idea of dinner just brought a generic sort of distressed look. Alex, however, mistook my expression.

‘Don’t worry I’ll do the dishes and stock up your supply of groceries,’ he said on his way out. I took my phone and sent Myra a text:

Dinner around 7. Alex wants to meet you. Please don’t forget to bring his favorite muffins.

5. The second deception

Having girls hot on their heels wasn’t something new to Alex. I remember the meanest girls at high school who would otherwise never bother to look my way, bringing me expensive gifts and promising to invite me to their summer pool parties, if they could sleep over at my_____ house. Their endless prodding stemmed from one burning desire: meeting Alex.

He, on the other hand, was reserved and took no notice at all, and often found himself helplessly falling for girls one could least expect to be on his list. Girls a part of Becca’s group often came from elite upper class families, wore mini leather skirts and boots to weekend parties; nonetheless, having spared no effort in trying to look as ravishing as possible, they couldn’t arouse my brother’s interest in the least. On the contrary, I often found him intently staring at those friends of mine, who I’d say were the definition of simplicity. Girls, who casually dressed in jeans and sweatshirts, and had their hair tied up in simple ponytails were the ones he’d fall head over heels for.

I couldn't criticize his choice because those friends of mine were naturally blessed with breathtaking looks, so they didn't bother putting on tons of makeup. Back during year 11, when Alex was in his final year of A-levels, I had a new admission in my class somewhere from a small town in Wales. Emma, as she introduced herself, was a beautiful brunette with a gorgeous pair of emerald green eyes. She was the reticent type that observes more and speaks less, and we got along so well at school that I couldn't resist inviting her over for a sleepover.

At the dinner table, however, Alex could not take his eyes off her. He didn't leer, but adorably shot furtive glances in her direction. His glances didn't go unnoticed, and mum quickly saw how uncomfortable Emma was getting, so she gestured me to take her upstairs. Later, as we were getting ready for bed, Alex came upstairs with a tub of Ben and Jerry's chocolate chip and Oreos, saying that if we were meant to have a sleepover, we were have it the proper way. He even sat down and made polite conversation with Emma, offering to watch a movie. He was inherently blessed with the ability to make even the most dejected soul laugh, easily hauling people out of their dark doldrums and making them feel like the happiest souls alive. He used the same skills to turn the tide; As somewhere during the movie, I glanced in their direction to find them holding hands under the covers. I wasn't quite enjoying the whole situation now- this was meant to be a sleepover to shrug off the crushing stress of the upcoming GCSE exams, but it ended up being a night triggering a mellow infatuation; plus, I was doing

nothing except for vexing at the endearing glances exchanged.

Somewhere during the middle of the movie, I fell asleep, but was woken shortly by a sporadic groaning sound. The moaning could be heard so close to my ear, and intermittently got so high-pitched, that for a moment I thought I was sleeping with my head against a pregnant cat about to go into labor.

I shifted in my bed a few times, pushing and then yanking the covers, when someone kicked me under the belly. I immediately jumped out of bed and switched on the lights, only to find Emma and Alex, passionately sharing a French kiss- with their heads on the other side of the bed and feet near my face-that's exactly where the kick came from. I had clearly interrupted a nocturnal make out, so they both, _____ understandably, gave me an embarrassed look. I was too worn out and nonplussed to say anything at all, so grabbing my pillow, I walked out towards Alex's room, gesturing him to grab a condom from dad's drawer if things went too far.

The next morning, I met Alex at the breakfast table with a sullen look on his face. When I asked why he was behaving like a moron, mum told me Emma's boyfriend had showed up, somewhere around 7 in the morning, to pick her up. The story ended just the way it should. Another desperate fellow, who'd simply cajoled me to invite her for a sleepover, though she wanted nothing but a taste of my brother's mouth. Well, at least Alex had been kind enough to grant her wishes. Kindness has its own reward, I sneered at him.

Since entering Cambridge as a law student, Alex had changed in a million different ways to acquire that enchanting, gentlemanly look, which made him a to-die-for on the dating list of every girl he met. As aforementioned, even back in high school, he wasn't the promiscuous type, in fact he never stuck his nose in the common dating issues at all. His dating life had been simple and straight, his girlfriends few and uncomplicated. However, upon entering Cambridge, the idea of entering into a relationship seemed so grotesque and loathsome, that he started regarding it as an absolute waste of time.

Whatever imperceptible dating life he had was almost immediately disregarded and deemed as useless; The only things his life revolved around were studying, spending at least three hours daily in the gym, and occasional partying with friends.

I'd been so worried that he'd very soon start masturbating with those fountain pens, and kissing those thick law textbooks he had adeptly memorized, I actually called mum one night.

'He's got no sex life at all, mum. He really needs a break. I reckon he's going to end up with a lifelong, dreading fear of having sex.'

If I was expecting some sort of appreciation for being concerned for my brother, I'd been delusional. Mum blatantly blurted that since dating wasn't quite my area of expertise, and I myself had a string of failed relationships, I had absolutely no right to question my brother's incipient asexuality.

‘Mum, you’re taking me wrong. Alex is actually changing, he needs to get a life.’

‘Rachel, you better focus on finding a more reliable boyfriend this time. I don’t want another disappointment from London showing up at our front door.’

‘Mum, you’re absolutely crazy,’ I yelled, but she had already hung up.

Why didn’t they get tired of targeting me all the time? I thought. It wasn’t my fault if God had packed a bunch of losers in my packet of boyfriends.

Every time I’d say yes to a boy, I felt as if I had finally learned what it meant to be prudent, but within a few weeks I’d realize what a creep I’d picked, and breaking up would become inevitable. I had no dreams of an _____ Olympic champion or a Chris Hemsworth duplicate; I just wanted a more hygienic, gentlemanly, and busy-enough- not -to- lie on -my- couch all day boyfriend- something more like Alex- who was himself ruefully single.

By seven thirty, Alex was back with dinner, chocolate cake, and a bottle of vodka. By the looks of the fancy comestibles, it seemed as if he ought to celebrate something.

‘Are we celebrating the fact that you’ve finally dating someone?’ I miffed.

‘Don’t worry, I won’t start dating without your permission’

‘Alex, you seriously need to consider....’

Our bantering was interrupted by a knocking sound so loud, it seemed as if the visitor had every intention to break through it. I opened the door to find Myra, with headphones on and a Tesco bag in the other. I pulled them out of her ears at which she got pretty annoyed.

‘What’s your problem?’ she scowled.

‘Do you have any idea you were near breaking my door?’

‘Really? It was only a gentle tap,’ she laughed.

‘Come on in.’

Alex was heating up something in the microwave, with his back towards us.

‘Who’s that tall guy?’ Myra whispered.

‘That’s Alex,’ I announced.⁵⁹

He turned around, and his gaze almost immediately shifted towards Myra. I admit, she looked extraordinarily beautiful, even though she was coming back from her evening shift. She was wearing a tiny navy blue cardigan, which accentuated the gentle curve of her small breasts, and her long Olympic legs perfectly fitted inside a pair of dark skinny jeans; she looked ready for a runway. Her hair was tied up in a messy bun, with a few strands loosely tucked behind her ears.

‘Hi, I’m Alex’ he said, quickly leaving whatever he was doing and moving around the large kitchen counter that separated them, to come closer to where she was

standing. With his gaze transfixed on her, he proffered his hand.

‘Nice to meet you, Alex. I’m Myra,’ she said, taking his hand.

Alex held her hand for quite a long time, his intense ice blue stare scanning her all over. It was hard not to be smitten by her, but I was a little embarrassed by Alex’s behavior. I could see she was blushing so hard that her whole face went red.

‘Alright, the food’s getting cold,’ I announced, trying to thaw the mixture of different emotions that was so tangibly building up in the air. We settled on the kitchen counter, Myra and I, on one side and Alex on the other.

I can’t exactly describe how difficult it was to shovel_____ morsels in my mouth. They both remained mostly quiet, occasionally looking up from their plates to either smile at each other, or see if the other person was laughing at jokes they cracked. I was the one who did most of the talking, and felt as if I was doing nothing, except for parching my own throat by prattling at length.

‘So Alex will take care of everything and nobody will be affected in the least,’ I said.

‘I hope so, though, Myra, you umm, did a fantastic job. I can’t thank you enough for what you did,’ said Alex, a bit hysterically.

‘I did whatever seemed right,’ she replied.

Why couldn't he take his eyes off her? His eyes were scanning everything, from those firm little breasts to those deep dimples that appeared every time she smiled. It was getting embarrassing for me. I was waiting for an opportunity to nudge him a bit, or kick his foot, to tell him how uncomfortable she was getting. Finally, she decided to excuse herself for a bit.

'Can I use your bathroom?'

'Sure. It's the room on the left.'

As soon as she was out of earshot, I scowled at Alex.

'What is wrong with you?' You've never ever behaved like that.'

'What do you mean, Rachel?' he asked, pretending as if I'd caught him off guard.

'Can you please stare at her a little less?'

He genuinely seemed bewildered now; he kept searching my face for a whimsical look, as if I'd burst into laughter any second, bantering him for taking my joke too seriously. But I was serious, and he had no clue what I was alluding to.

'I really have no idea what you're talking about. I wasn't leering at her, you very well know it's not my habit,' he finally uttered, a bit peevishly.

It was apparent he didn't like the fact that I'd caught him gaping at Myra. What did he expect? You're looking at someone through a high-technology advanced scanner gaze- the kind that's usually found at airport- and you expect it to pass unnoticed?

‘Alright, I’m sorry. I was joking,’ I said, trying to sound a bit witty.

‘No, you’re right. I was continuously looking at her, but was it that bad?’

‘Well, I guess she got a little uneasy, otherwise she never uses anyone’s washroom. Literal definition of a hygiene freak. She’d probably be rotting inside by now.’

At this, we both laughed loudly and incessantly. It wasn’t meant to be funny, but it did turn out to be. We didn’t stop until we started choking on the few bites of blueberry muffin, we’d started to nibble on.

‘Rachel, you have to admit, she is super attractive. You know when I first saw her I couldn’t bring myself to admit she’s real,’ he said, rubbing his neat hands over his face. He looks adorable, I thought.

But at the same time, an alarming thought crossed my mind; it was outrageously inappropriate for me to swoon over my brother all the time, and that it was high time I started looking for a boyfriend.

Just then, we heard the door closing, and before we had the time to regain composure, Myra walked out with her hair now opened and falling loosely behind.

‘Is everything alright?’ she asked, looking a bit discombobulated.

‘Actually, we were thinking about going out for ice cream. Why not enjoy ourselves a little?’ said Alex.

‘Sounds good’ I said.

But Myra was not having any of it now. She looked so discomfited about the idea of just grabbing a cone across the street that she immediately came up with an excuse.

‘I’m sorry I won’t be able to join you people. I’ve got lots of homework to do and given the circumstances, I simply can’t afford to act heedlessly.’

I wanted to spend time with my brother alone, and was fairly happy she wasn’t accompanying us, but Alex was suddenly bummed out by her refusal. The disappointment on his face was so real- the look you get from a child when you tell him he won’t be getting a birthday present. Was he infatuated with her? Or he just wanted company? I really didn’t know, but it hurt to see him that upset.

⁶³
‘But tomorrow works. We can have coffee or something in the afternoon,’ offered Myra. I was thankful she’d realized how rude her refusal had been, and that she’d actually let Alex down.

‘Great. I’ll meet you both outside the library around one o clock, okay? After, I sort out the matter at hand, of course.’

‘Done,’ we both replied in unison.

Just as she got up to make leave, she turned towards Alex and moving a bit closer said, ‘Alex, thanks for whatever you’re doing. It really means a lot. I can’t find enough words to thank you.’

‘Oh, don’t worry, it’s going to be alright. Trust me,’ he said, with a cute boyish smile. For a moment, they just

stood near the door, the distance between them greatly reduced, the initial diffidence having disappeared, and started blatantly into each other's eyes. Neither of them said anything, but just kept looking at each other's face, meticulously registering each and every facial feature, which they could think about at night. Though Myra was tall enough to make it pass Alex's shoulder, Alex still towered over her, his broad-shouldered athletic body covering every single part of her. Since I couldn't make eye contact with any of them, I tried to sigh a little louder to remind them that the earth hadn't opened up and engulfed me. They needed to bring an end to whatever that was sparkling between them. They both looked at me, and after waving me goodbye over Alex's shoulder, she smiled at Alex and left.

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As he closed the door, he turned around and gave me a confusingly warm smile. His forehead was wet with sweat droplets and his breathing unsteady. Just then, I found out the answer to my question. He wasn't infatuated; he was really falling in love, and I knew this because I'd never seen him in that state before.

'Alright, as promised, I'm going to clear the dishes now. Meanwhile, you can enjoy a glass of wine or so.'

And it happened, as I had expected. He did clear the table, but he started with Myra's dishes.

6. Beginning of the greatest deception.

There was a shoal of fish that managed to escape a trap set underwater, but only one unlucky fish was caught. Once a farmer put a handful of seeds in damp, clammy soil; the seeds eventually started to germinate into a seedling, and after being scrupulously looked after, myriads of young rose plants emerged. However, one such seed, nonetheless being provided with similar propitious conditions, failed to make its way through the layers of dense soil, and got squashed underneath.

Similar to the seed and fish, is the story of the natural destruction of a star that used to glimmer so brightly, that its light was thought to be enough to illuminate the entire expanse of the somber sky. The other stars hovering in its proximity, used to envy this star's glow, and often premeditated on how to remove it from the constellation.

One day, they learned that a meteor was coming their way, with an intensity fierce enough to wreck them in one blow. Every star began fearing its destruction, and consequently, began maneuvering its way out of the path the meteor was intended to take; they, however, refused to inform that particular star of the incoming destruction. 'It deserves to end like that,' they agreed.

Not being privy to the impending doom, this innocent star found it strange that its neighbors were moving away; unperturbed, it simply continued to loiter around. Nothing can defer the inevitable, and thus, the poor thing was wrecked into a billion pieces, in a blast so loud that people on Earth feared the end was near. There was abundant rejoice among the survivors, who

heaved a sigh of relief at the destruction of their greatest foe.

I wish I had another way of explaining, but this seems the shortest way to say what I've been through in my childhood: I was that fish that failed to escape life's traps, the seed that couldn't jut out of mud- despite my parents (who you can assume, were the farmers) making tremendous efforts — by watering and provision of essential nutrients- but I turned out to be an obstinate piece unwilling to shine to my full potential. And yes, I was a living example of the star that was mercilessly deceived- the worst of all non-human forms that define me. Let's deal with them step by step.

No one's life is perfect, right? That's what we get to hear all the time. Born to two able lawyers, where money was never an issue- as long as the cases kept coming- having a comfortable home, loving parents, and most treasured blessing of all- an overprotective, loving brother. What trap could my life possibly have? —life was seamlessly perfect; however, an invisible trap made up of thick nylon ropes was laid underneath my feet the moment I took my first breath. The initial years of my life managed to pass by with great tranquility because I simply hadn't arrived at the juncture where the trap would enclose me in itself. Let's make this simple- each year marked a certain distance I unwittingly covered on the net laid perfectly beneath me, until I reached the point when it was meant to wrap around me, and then suffocate me until I found the force to make it stop.

Mum and Dad, who owned a law firm named Wilson's, were doing pretty well and were able to bring in a fancy amount of amount every month, but this came at a cost: passing over the burdening task of raising your children to the babysitter. Alex and I were practically raised by our nanny, Juliette. I still remember sitting on the last step of the long, quaint, spiraling staircase that connected three floors of our family bungalow. I'd anxiously wait for mum to come back, because I had this irrational, inherently present fear of something horrible happening to her if I didn't see her before bedtime.

For instance, I'd imagine her car sliding off a cliff, or a robber taking her stuff and murdering her in the terrible, engulfing darkness of the night. Our caretaker used to comfort me endlessly, saying things like 'Your mum has lots of work to do, so don't worry' or 'Sweetheart go to sleep, I promise to wake you up when they come'- but it was all in vain; I would start crying frantically, driving poor Juliette insane until mum would arrive somewhere around midnight.

To allay my childish anxiety, Juliette would invite me to come sit with her downstairs. The house was ginormous with about eight bedrooms, three living rooms, two massive kitchens, a library, a long lurking hallway whose walls were lined with ancient family pictures, and perfectly manicured gardens which stretched as far as the eye could see.

Anyway, I remember tugging Alex to wake up and wait with me, which he did, only if he didn't have two hours of football practice in the morning; otherwise, like a

caring twelve-year-old brother, he'd stay awake with me, volunteering to make me hot chocolate.

One memory- the memory that greatly transformed an eight-year-old girl's mind, and the one that's basically the kernel of all the trap discussion going on — still reverberates in my mind.

On a Sunday night, around 11 pm, I sat at the corner of my bed crying. Firstly because I had dance practice in the morning, and I'd lost my pink stockings. Secondly, because mum wasn't home. Though dad was also working late in the same office, I never really cried for him the way I used to cry for mum. It's not that I had some sort of intense hatred for him, which would compel me to chant long devilish sermons for him to die and mum to escape if they both were a part of a car crash; I just naturally fretted about mum more- deep down inside me, existed a visceral feeling of mum being too vulnerable.

Anyway, I was crying pretty hysterically- most of it the usual wailing- but a little for my missing stockings. Juliette, who was usually watching reality shows, hurriedly came up and offered me to come down and give her company. The thought of watching TV with her- who, despite having a visible four-kids-mum figure, didn't have a tint of motherly instincts- was comforting. But I regretted my decision the moment I saw the kitchen: she was having the best time of her life.

'On the floor' swirled in the air, and the ginormous sky gray kitchen counter had numerous comestibles sprawled across it in an eclectic display: a can of lemon

ice tea, Mark and Spencer's butter cookies, and the spaghetti Bolognese we had for dinner; she had even ventured to open the refrigerator and take out the popsicles Alex and I had saved for mum and dad. Being a middle-aged woman, in maybe her late thirties or early forties, her seemingly acute predilection for such eatables was outlandishly inapt.

'Hey, those are for mum and dad!' I exclaimed, pointing towards the popsicles carelessly tossed on the counter.

I tried to grab them and put them back in the refrigerator, but they were already halfway through melting completely; I did, what at that time, seemed the best way out to an eight-year-old- I furled my night suit's T-shirt, ran my hand across the strewn puddle of semi-solid ice and sugary liquid that had formed- the remnants of what was intended to be a sweet surprise. I pushed it in my T-shirt and further rolled it up to prevent the water from dripping. Then, taking careful and measured steps, I lumbered towards the refrigerator and put them back in.

Now that I had successfully accomplished my task, it was time to put my irascibility on display. Stomping my feet as hard as I could, I marched towards the living room and turned off the TV, which boasted an episode of Friends. Then I came back to the kitchen and turned off the music player, putting an end to the ecstasy whirling in the air. All this time, Juliette leaned on the kitchen counter, propping herself up with one hand, and drumming the fingers of the other on the counter- probably as a replacement of the melody an eight-year-

old had abruptly deprived her of- and the pose, it simply suggested that she was a young teenager, babysitting to get herself through college, impatiently waiting for my parents to return so that she could return to her eagerly waiting boyfriend; I wanted to tell her she simply had no chance of camouflaging her middle-aged woman style behind that of a twenty-something- the patent frustrations, desire to gobble down whatever childish snacks she found, probably because her kids wouldn't leave any of it at home, made it all too clear.

She watched me with a kind of sardonic amusement- the kind that is followed by a satirical response like 'Are you done kid?', 'wanna clear up something else' or 'kids are in a habit of wearing their mum's shoes nowadays'.

I really didn't care what she said to me. Every day I saw her rummaging through our pantry and shelves in the living room — something mum had forbidden her to do. Yet, out of habit or general frustration, she couldn't keep her hands off things that were meant to be off limits. I was getting terribly sick of having her around every night: the clock barely ticked seven and sturdy old Juliette, with her bulging physique, was there making her way through our hallway. I had already tried all sorts of ways to get rid of her- whining in front of mum about how her loud music wouldn't let us sleep, and cajoling dad to do whatever he asked only if he got rid of Juliette- but no, for them, Juliette was a diva, a goddess, who couldn't be more perfect.

'What's gotten into you?' she asked a bit peevishly.

‘Mum would be angry if she sees the house like this. Everything you’re doing is off limits,’ I managed to say.

‘Well, young lady, that’s not your headache. As far as you are concerned, you better clamber back into bed because you’ve got school tomorrow’.

She was being really rude now. I could feel every part of my blood boiling fiercely, ready to break through the layers of skin, and gush out, burning Juliette there and then. For a fleeting second, my eyes darted around the room and settled on the gray drapes covering the oblong hallway windows. I contemplated pulling them off and strangling Juliette- even the thought of it was so incredibly alluring, but I knew my parents were lawyers, and they wouldn’t hesitate to put their daughter behind the bars for being a murderer- such were their ridiculous principles about justice.

Before I could retort something in return, the phone-fixed abreast our family photograph in the living room-rang, and she scurried towards the living room.

‘I’m going to tell your parents how much you’ve misbehaved,’ she sneered on her way.

‘Do whatever you want. But trust me, it’s going to make no difference,’ I uttered in a barely audible voice, but by the looks of the alarming look shot me across the living room, I was certain she was about to go ballistic.

I stood there, watching her, as she nodded her head continuously at something that was being instructed either by mum or by dad. It was half past midnight

already, and I was expecting my parents to arrive any second.

‘Well, well, we do have great news. Your dad says he’s five minutes away and I’m allowed to go now. You should be thankful I didn’t mention your insolent behavior on the phone, but I’m not gonna let it go like this. Tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, I’ll be confronting you in front of your parents.’

‘Yeah okay,’ I replied, as casually and coolly as possible.

‘Now you’d better creep back into bed, before I leave. I’ll turn the hallway lights on my way out.’

I ambled back upstairs, but I had no intention of going back to bed. I turned off the light in the upstairs lobby and slammed my bedroom door with extra force to_____ make it abundantly clear that I wasn’t loitering near the staircase. I sat down on the floor, with my knees pressed against my chest and my head huddled between them.

I remember sitting there in the darkness, and playing with my hair, until I heard the front door opening and closing. Then I crept downstairs and sat on the kitchen table. I thought about taking out Ben and Jerry’s, but before I could even get up, dad’s car pulled up in the driveway.

Shit, I murmured.

Dad was going to be really mad. Quickly getting up, I rushed to the pantry and hid behind the door. The door opened, but this time the coquettish laugh of a woman

could be heard, which was certainly not mum's. Who is that? And where the hell is mum? I thought. I kept standing behind the pantry door, waiting for them to come into the kitchen, so that I could get a grasp of what was exactly going on.

A few seconds later, the kitchen light was turned on and the two of them sat on the stools under the counter. From that vantage point, I could get a very clear view of whoever this woman was; she had a long angular face, her hair, the color of caramel cream, was loosely dangling on her sides, and she was wearing an emerald green gown. My heart immediately started to race. Something strange was going on inside me—something nowhere near normal. My entire Thoracic Cavity shuddered in an avalanche of throbbing and thudding organs, leaving the brain giddy and anguished—the nascent panic disorder that would eventually become a life-long illness.

Just then, dad got up and began rummaging through the kitchen cabinets for I don't what-maybe wine—anyway, he couldn't find any of it, so he retreated to his place, but this time he pulled his stool unbelievably close to hers—the first obscene act in the series of impropriety that was to follow shortly afterwards. I contemplated running out and confronting them, but I couldn't find the courage.

One question reverberated in my mind.

Was mum okay? And if not, had they murdered and thrown her in some murky dungeon? — I was a child who mastered in the art of brooding.

‘Just stay for a while, please,’ I heard dad say.

‘Andy, I’m terribly knackered. Cases are piling up, and if I don’t get some work done, you’ll find me buried beneath that tremendous stack,’ she explained, somewhat pitifully.

Who was she exactly pitying? Herself, for not being to spend time with her precious ‘Andy’, or Andy for being deprived of a few illicit hours of her company?

I had, by then, figured out two things: This woman was a lawyer, probably an employee in my parents’ firm, and this meeting was a clandestine one. Clandestine. Yes, that’s the word that precisely described the situation- I read it in a novel I’d finished a couple of weeks ago, and I was glad for aptly applying it over here. The way she called my dad ‘Andy’- a bold shift from Mr. Andrew Smith- suggested that something intimate was going on between them. Besides, what was dad so intent on making her stay?

If she was an employee, she should have been aware of the fact that she was trespassing boundaries by showing up at her boss’s place in the middle of the night. This woman was intrusive and intrepid, and I wanted to lurch out of my dark vantage point and ambush her. Ambush her like a feral child would have done; tugging at those perfectly blow-dried hair, until it was a disheveled mess of hay; digging my fingernails into her smooth skin, until deep marks marked her face; and messing with her face so that her flawless mascara and lipstick would resemble the blotchy, smudgy drawing of a kindergarten. But I couldn’t; I was

afraid of something even the angels guarding me weren't aware of.

From that vantage point, I just observed. I did register the moments when dad put his hand on her thigh and gently caress it; I noted that for a few fleeting seconds they would hold each other's gaze, smile lecherously, and insinuate through brief eye contacts that were ready for something greater, better, and much more pleasurable. Finally, dad was the one to galvanize the woman- whose name and whereabouts were still not a hundred percent clear- into action.

'Inez, we both know that we've come a long way. We barely get time to see each other, so I can't see the reason behind your hurrying.'

'Andy, please, what we're doing isn't right. It's disastrous and the wreckage is going to be mutual. _____ Neither part is going to remain intact.'

But instead of dispensing her thoughts on the damage she was referring to as mutual, dad stood up, and quickly covering the distance between them, wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her closer- closer than the distance between two unlike poles of a magnet- and what happened next doesn't need to be put in words.

In the corner of the dark pantry, somewhere around 1 am, stood an eight-year-old girl, helplessly watching her father share an indulgent kiss with a despicable woman she didn't know. However, she did know that streams of tears were racing down her cheeks, and the

ballerina stockings that were responsible for her crying, lay furled in the opposite corner of the dark pantry.

7. A little Sparkle.

London was at its best. It was a surprisingly warm day, the apricity startling and exhilarating. This wonderful weather, characterized by light, breezy winds, which made the dried leaves scattered on the ground rustle, the fresh ones still attached to twigs gently swirl, and the clouds hovering above to begin an endless race across the pallid sky. The campus building, which hadn't seemed that appealing so far, looked exceptionally beautiful, with myriads of students resting on the freshly cut grass of the vast lawns that sprawled ahead.

Myra and I waited outside the main entrance that separated the campus from the city center's busiest road, lined with all sorts of cafés, clothing brands, and two main retail stores.

Given the cause for waiting, one might expect us to be in a highly distraught state; albeit being tensed, our manners varied greatly: Myra sauntered from one place to the other, tantalizingly eyeing all the pedestrians with coffees, juices, and grilled Panini wrapped up in brown paper. I, on the other hand, frantically paced the length of the narrow sidewalk, praying Alex would come out of with good news. It should have been the opposite way. Why was I worrying myself to death, when the person who was in the danger zone was dreaming about coffee and sandwiches? It was ridiculous.

The aforementioned weather is just an exaggeration- a bluff to release you of your worries, by picturing something heavenly and heavily desired.

On the contrary, that day was an anomaly- we were in the midst of November, few days away from the coldest month of the year, but that day the air was superflously clammy; I could literally feel every single layer of foundation dissolving in moisture, and running down my neck. But the sights were real- people did seem particularly rapturous, even the grumpiest ones were chatting and passing smiles to each other. What was wrong then? Had I turned into a queer, unworldly young woman sweating in the finest of weathers? Or were all the surrounding people, including my sweet friend Myra, were deliberately creating a thick layer of pretense to make me feel inane and unworldly? Nope, not possible.

Though, the theory of people feigning to enjoy the weather to make me believe that I had become idiosyncratic beyond acceptability seemed pretty rational, I let it pass as being too cynical.

Then what was wrong? Was the weather really pleasant, and I was sweating profusely for no reason? That was when Myra came up with the answer.

‘Rachel, oh my God! Just look at it. Seems as if you’ve just been out of a blast furnace or something. Your clothes are drenched,’ she said.

‘It’s the weather, darling,’ I tried to sound a bit acerbic.

‘Ah don’t put it on the weather. It’s unbelievably beautiful. Look how happy everyone looks. It’s all the brooding your body’s just trying to grapple with.’

‘You have no idea how high the water’s above our head. If they continue to look at the whole matter the same way, you know you’d have to leave, Myra,’ I reasoned.

‘Well, as far as I know, universities are pretty abundant in London. I could go anywhere,’ came the casual reply.

‘But still. Just because of me....’

‘Rachel, a human mind can’t function on an empty tummy, and right now I’m starving. Let’s go and grab bagels and coffee.’

‘Yeah₈ but Alex would be looking for us. He said he’d be out in an hour or so,’ I said.

‘We aren’t going to South London, Rachel. We’ll be across the street. Text him to meet us there.’

I took out my iPhone and left him a text. Then we crossed the street and entered the same coffee shop where the blonde kid had ruined my shirt on the very first day.

We took a table in the corner, and then ordered three coffees: black for Myra, espresso for Alex, and a double cream hazelnut cappuccino for myself (I didn’t feel guilty because I really needed to allay my nerves), and three bagels: salmon for Myra, grilled chicken for Alex, and a cheese and ham one for myself.

Myra offered to pay, even insisted when she pushed me slightly to get in my way to pay the bill, but I didn't let her. I simply couldn't let her. There was a visceral part of me that knew Myra had her own story lurking behind the gaiety façade, and I couldn't ask anything of her, in any way. We had developed such a fine rapport, I could sense things without her actually saying them. I was aware she was financially constrained, like me, she also didn't belong from London, she grew up in Wales, but I reckoned she didn't even have a proper place to live in. I was intent on asking her everything, slowly and steadily.

Just as we settled in our spot, Alex walked through the door, bending his head and torso to squeeze himself through the narrow entrance, just because he was so tall and broadly built. He was wearing a navy blue denim shirt, with his typical black jeans and white sneakers. The jacket he put on this morning, was neatly folded and draped over his lower arm, which made him look somewhat like an Armani fashion show's opening model. He looked a little perplexed, like a six-year-old asked to stand in a long queue and recite the entire family's meal. I waved and he smiled radiantly, just like the bright sun that was up that morning.

As he moved across the small café, towards where we were sitting, a few heads curiously turned around and glanced in our direction. I scanned the room to find that most of them were university students, students from our university and even our class; however, one person in particular, Amanda Rocks- Becca's other half, shoulder to cry on, right hand, other eye, sister from

another mother- was looking at us with her squinted eyes. She must have been staring at Alex- like all the other spellbound, gaping customers. I couldn't let such a moment go- if I had been blessed with a brother like Alex, I wouldn't refrain from showing him off to the entire world. I leapt to my feet, and standing on my toes threw my arms around him, then kissed him lightly on the cheek, even though my head wouldn't make it pass his chest.

'Alex, thank you for everything. I want you to know that I really love you and appreciate all your efforts.'

Whether it was the news we were still oblivious to, or the fact that we had given precedence to our hunger instead of his request to wait for him outside, my sudden display of affection irritated him.

⁸⁰
'Yeah, Yeah, I know,' he muttered, while trying to shrug me off.

I looked at him, and then at Amanda, who had narrowed her eyes to closely taken in whatever was going on -a rather scrupulous scrutiny that wouldn't let the slightest detail pass by unnoticed. Thankfully, he glanced over to where my vision was transfixed, Alex understood the reason behind the exaggerated display of affection, and thus, turning his head back to me, he looked at me in the eye, and we had the kind of silent communication we used to have back in childhood; 'I've got this' or something equivalent, was what he tried to convey.

Without giving Amanda a millisecond to sneer at me, he immediately reciprocated.

‘Don’t you worry, my sweet little princess,’ he said, trying to appear as affectionate as possible- this ostentation was edging on the boundaries of complete failure.

Technically being only three and a half years younger than him, I wasn’t really the ‘Sweet little princess’ he declared me to be.

He then started rubbing my back, and that was enough to set Amanda on fire. The part of her that was initially smoldering, started to burn with a vicious intensity, and I could already see her callously rolling her eyes and gesturing her girlfriends to get up and leave. This gesture earned her a good rebuffing, because they were simply too busy in gobbling down their scones and Éclairs to stave off a fly- serves her right, I thought. Though I wasn’t Alex’s girlfriend, and it comes without saying that our relation was a completely platonic, brother- sister one, which in no way made me her rival, she greatly envied our perfect symbiosis, and simply couldn’t stand it. Though I greatly relished showing off my brother, I couldn’t help but wonder, ‘was he that coveted?’ I was now growing increasingly impatient to find him a girlfriend.

Putting me down to my feet, Alex’s eyes now shifted towards Myra. Her head was propped on her elbow, and her hair dangled loosely from the side of her neck- where they were perfectly tucked; she was watching us with great amusement. Her black turtleneck, impeccable fall of hair, and the Kate Spade wristwatch (which seemed a hundred percent real- my eye never missed an authentic piece) made her look incredibly

classy and unique; she gave the impression of a girl too ahead of her contemporaries or maybe too exhausted by life's burdening adversaries, to even care about the unspoken, yet mutually cognized competition, that Amanda and I, were a part off. Yet, no matter how much rivalry might exist between Amanda and me and all the girls- stemming from the desire of Alex's attention- I knew Myra was the one he was really concerned about. Of course, he loved me, loved me beyond everything, and why wouldn't he? For I was his only sister, but my relationship with him was different- It, in no way, resembled the doing of lovers; and I was clearly putting myself in a witless position by competing with Amanda, because the nature of my relationship was so different- I really just needed a boyfriend.

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Myra, on the other hand, if ever competed with Amanda, Becca, or all those other self-assured, pompous, and conceited girls, she wouldn't just set them on fire: she'd make them blaze firecely.

Now, as his gaze shifted towards Myra, the freezing phase began- something I had so conscientiously memorized in A-level chemistry.

Alex again resorted to the way he had behaved when he saw her the first time. We either give something unpleasant to the eye, a dismissive glance, followed by a grotesque grimace; pleasant to the eye a momentary stare, lasting ten, maybe fifteen seconds, to show how appeased we are. However, out of all of these categorizes, the stare that distinguishes the object under vision from all other living or non- living things,

has properties similar to a cooling curve: the particular freezing or condensation period lasts for a fairly longer period of time, and greatly changes the state of matter, just like the look evolves the chemistry going on between its holders. Similar was the case here: the moment Alex shifted his gaze towards Myra, the freezing stage began. He kept looking at her, first bewilderingly, then with familiarity, and finally expectantly. I could clearly tell that he was expecting something from her, or more correctly, yearning for something? What did he want? Did he expect her to get up from her seat and throw her arms around him? Or do something even more coveted, pined, and uncontrollably passionate: that is, to press her lips against his? I knew one thing for sure: no matter what type or degree of favor one might bestow on her, and no matter how ostentatiously one might behave, she would never deign to press her lips against his- it was just another rule in her precisely written book of principles. That was Myra's way. I just knew it, in fact, could see it coming. The longer they looked into each other's eyes, the closer we all — everybody present in the café- were to being pushed behind a curtain defining invisibility.

As the moment shared by the two deepened and intensified at an unprecedented pace, our existence began to evaporate, faster than already boiling water placed directly under the scorching heat of the sun. They, especially Alex, had no idea what was going around him; people gawked, girls couldn't get to turn their heads back, but he only looked at Myra. All of us had turned into some non-existent stones that they

even bothered to look at. I felt like one of those ants scurrying underneath the table- though endlessly searching for crumbs and discarded morsels, they are barely visible to the human eye. My position was pretty relatable.

At last, quickly realizing the need to break away from the spell cast over them- to save me from further discomfiture and awkward silence- Myra rose to shake his hand.

‘Hi, Alex, I hope I’m about to hear something positive.’

‘Oh yes, they’ve decided to give you a second chance.’

‘What? Oh my god, that’s amazing. I really don’t know how to thank you,’ she almost jumped in excitement.

Though the untroubled state of mind, she managed to maintain throughout, in no way suggested that she viewed the problem as a harrowing one, she was greatly relieved. In fact, she nearly jumped at her spot and lurched forward to embrace me.

‘See, I told you there’s nothing to worry about,’ she said gleefully.

‘Yeah. By the way, Alex, what exactly did you do? It must have taken a lot of cajoling and chicanery,’ I bantered

‘On the contrary, I had to make use of two essential tools that you woefully lack: polite conversation and respect. That is all it took to make them reconsider their decision,’ he said, in an innocently whimsical manner, smiling at both of us.

‘Blah. Don’t lie. If polite conversation and respect were the key to everything, then I’d be the most successful person alive.’

‘Well then, why don’t you tell Myra about the Aunt Lydia incident?’ he said, while settling down in his seat.

‘Which incident? I’m pretty sure Rachel must have messed up things. Nothing out of the blue,’ she laughed.

I wanted to pull her hair, punch her in the face. She’d known me for less than a month, and within this period, when I displayed no signs of my curmudgeon side, she had so perspicaciously figured out that I was born to be a troublemaker. She had merely stated facts, but I didn’t want the two to revel in something I wasn’t quite ready to accept.

‘That is a hundred percent true,’ concurred Alex.

‘Alex, you better keep your mouth shut, otherwise you aren’t getting any chocolate mousse,’ I scowled.

‘I’m sorry, I actually had it for breakfast this morning. Since you’d already stacked up five more cups behind the cucumbers and tomatoes, I didn’t feel guilty. But I’ll replenish your stock, I promise.’

‘I hide my coffee cans beneath frozen vegetables in the refrigerator. Tastes like a cappuccino and broccoli stew though, but it’s the only way to keep them safe from my roommates,’ Myra added in.

‘Greedy roommates,’ laughed Alex, with mirth greater than the hilarity her little add-in actually deserved.

The waitress then signaled us to collect our order, and I got up to collect the trays. By the time I was back, Myra was flashing me her wide grin, which meant nothing but the fact that I'd been exposed-Alex couldn't keep himself from keeping my foolish little act a secret. But just as I set the food down, and each of us started devouring our orders, Alex put his balled fist over his mouth and made a sort of rapid rolling gesture with his other hand- a common way of indicating that you have to say something.

'I totally forgot to tell Myra about the Aunt Lydia incident,' came the frisky reminder I was so fretfully waiting for.

But before I had the time to protest, he began his humorous narration.

⁸⁶
'So what happened was that two or maybe three years ago, we had our usual Christmas dinner at our place. We never really get to host it, for mum and dad consider it to be nothing more than a gruesome rigmarole, and an occasion when even your most distant relatives- whom you haven't seen in ten years- take immense pleasure in making nasty comments about your life. Anyways, on grandpa's insistence, the dinner took place at our house. Just when we all were gathered around the kitchen counter, eyeing the Christmas pudding, my six-year-old cousin, Jane, came up to Rachel and very distressingly asked her,

'My doll doesn't have a prince. How can I make her more likeable?'

Now I have no idea what was doing on in my sister's mind, for without giving it a second thought, she blurted 'Maybe you could make her boobs and butt bigger, just like our lovely aunt Lydia. Look how all the adults, including our very own parents, are goggling at her unbelievably extra- large bosom.'

Poor Jane, having made little sense of the solution Rachel presented her with, nodded her head innocently and said 'alright, that'll definitely work'. But Rachel was particularly out of luck that day, because Aunt Lydia- who, by the way, is my dad's oldest sister- had heard everything and went berserk. Seriously, I had never seen her that exasperated. Though, Rachel's solution was pretty funny, and we all, including our parents, laughed until we were off our nuts. But since my sweet sister had touched a raw nerve, there was no way she was getting a get out of jail free card; Aunt Lydia bellowed, admonished, and harangued her until there were real tears in her eyes, and when we couldn't take it no more, my parents- having felt mortified for their daughter's personal comments, were quiet.

But then they couldn't take it anymore and mum scorned: 'Every living and non-living soul knows that you've got ginormous boobs. Nothing to be ashamed about, Lydia.' And everybody began supporting Rachel, who was pitied for her crocodile tears.'

Though she had started laughing even before Alex had said something funny, now, she guffawed so loudly and uncontrollably, that all the customers saturated in the small café turned around to look at us.

A man sitting adjacent, with his back towards us, turned around to ask if Myra was having a panic attack.

‘My son goes through similar phases,’ he said, glancing at Myra sympathetically. Her entire body convulsed with the same rhythm an earthquake sets the tectonic plates into- she clearly looked like a Nicotine-deprived drug addict, who goes through a sudden surge of ecstasy at being injected 60 mg of absolute pleasure.

‘No Sir, thank you for your concern, everything’s fine. Something funny came up,’ Alex replied, offering his cute, gentlemanly smile.

‘Alright mate, just make sure she doesn’t end up on the floor shaking,’ he said with genuine concern.

‘Yeah, don’t worry,’ we both replied in unison.

⁸⁸
‘Myra, are you alright? We all had sort of the same reaction the first time, but people are actually staring,’ Alex susurrated, while gently rubbing the lower end of her back.

‘Honestly, it came as no surprise. But I’m wondering then why does Rachel rebuke me for being blunt and overconfident?’ Alex looked puzzled.

‘I guess I’m missing out on something. One of you would have to fill me in,’ he suggested, eyeing me quizzically.

Myra had started to flash me her impish grin again. Oh no, I thought. Not again. Before another, seemingly funny but super abundantly humiliating incident-recalling session began, I hauled Myra out of her chair

and steered her towards the door, shouting behind my back,

‘We’ve got class in ten minutes, see you later.’ Though I badly wanted to laugh my heart out- which would have, perhaps, resulted in me shaking more wildly than Myra- I acted as if I had been sufficiently humiliated and couldn’t bear it any longer. Or maybe I could have?



Alex was going back on Sunday morning, so on Saturday night, we both were huddled on the couch in my apartment, with hot chocolate and popcorn- a weird but extremely satisfying combination- watching Grey’s Anatomy and having are usual, but now, pretty rarely held heart-to-heart conversation.

‘Do you think she has a boyfriend?’ he asked on a _____ whim.

Alex’s question threw me off balance.

‘Who she? You’re talking about Myra?’

‘Yeah, Myra. Besides, who else have we met recently?’

I could sense the desperation in the voice, the eagerness in his eyes, and the burning desire inside him that was blazing fiercely than ever- I knew my brother was parched and only knowledge of the oblivion could quench him.

But my case wasn’t any different. This new friend of mine, who could provoke the most irascible part of me, and rejuvenate a behavioral disposition I tried to bury

inside some unknown vacant opening, greatly intrigued me.

And yet, despite all we had to go through, with she acting as my savior and then vice versa (I should say Alex acting as her savior, to be more precise) I didn't know a single thing about her. Why was she such a secretive person? I wouldn't classify her as a taciturn individual. Then why was she so hesitant to reveal anything about herself? After all, I was her friend. In fact, more than a friend- at least, that's what I considered myself to be. Her reticence to disclose inflamed my inquisitiveness about the disclosed.

'Rachel, I'm asking you something,' prodded Alex.

I pretended to be lost in thought, but I really didn't know what to say. I could simply tell him to his face that she'd kept me as ignorant as him, but no- I was a gadfly and a gadfly loves to make people suffer. Instead of ending the apparent anguish he was in, I wanted to prolong it, stretch it, pull the string with more tension, by refusing to reveal something that was still unrevealed; the suspense would kill him, but then how else would I know how deep my brother had drowned in this sea of love?

'Yeah, maybe. I really don't remember. I did see a handsome lad kissing her the other day, though,' I replied as casually as possible, trying hard to suppress my chuckles, which were already waiting near the end of my throat, to rush out and ruin my plan.

I didn't look at him in the eye, because I knew he'd immediately tell I was lying- he'd been blessed with beauty and brains, at the same time.

'What? Rachel you're lying. Swear that you saw her kissing a boy,' he mumbled.

He could barely find the words to articulate a response.

'Believe or not, I told you what I saw,' I replied in between suppressed chuckles.

It took a great amount of self-control not to start guffawing like a maniac. I turned around to look at Alex for the first time. His face was pallid, drained of every single bit of color it had; he stared intently at the television, with a very serious expression, as if his A level result was about to be announced and his stomach had a million butterflies fluttering inside it._____

'Alex, are you alright? It seems as if you've just seen your ex hanging out with your best mate,' I teased.

He looked at me, and searched my face for signs: signs that would tell him that all this was a ruse and simply not true. I could recognize that pleading look in his eye- the look you'll find in greatly enamored people who just can't believe something so unbelievable about their other half.

'What?' I asked.

'I don't believe you at all,' he stated straightforwardly.

'Listen. I'm not getting a free ticket to Dior's fashion show to make you believe, alright? So if you think I'm lying, I simply don't care. But I'm a little flummoxed at

the way you're acting. She's an attractive young woman, doesn't she have the right to have a boyfriend? God knows what's going on in your mind.'

With a pretentious sigh, I grabbed my phone and walked out of the living room. I was being churlish, especially towards someone who didn't deserve it at all. But why was he being so shy? I wanted him to confess, loud and clearly, that he was in love with my new friend?

'Goodnight,' he called from behind.

'Nightie Night,' came my usual response.

At around 2 am, I woke up to the faint sound of the television still on. The hallway light, which was still on, managed to enter my room through the small opening under the door, and I instantly knew something- the lie I had told- was bothering Alex. I crept out of my bed, and quietly tiptoed out of my bedroom to find Alex sitting in the kitchen.

'Is everything alright? You don't seem that well,' I asked, genuinely concerned.

'Yeah, I guess I had too much coffee. Can't sleep.'

'We didn't drink coffee, Alex. We had hot chocolate,' I corrected.

'Ah, it must be general anxiety then,' he falsely reasoned.

'Or anxiety because I told you Myra has a boyfriend,' I corrected.

'What? No. Ra... you've got me wrong.'

At this point, I let out all the laughter I'd been holding inside me. It was a huge relief, to admit. All those restrained chortles were definitely giving my abdominal cavity a hard time; no wonder why sleep came in parcels delivered by degrees, which remained in your hands for a fleeting second, until it was again snatched away by some vicious force, making you lurch out of your already agonizing period of somnolence.

'Chill out a bit. I'm surprised you couldn't make out from my expressions that I was playing with you. As far as I know, Myra doesn't have a boyfriend and I didn't see anyone kissing her. And as long as she doesn't let go of her habit of blurting out the first thing that comes to her mind, I think she's going to be pretty single.'

Relief flooded his face like one of those fast flowing rivers emerging out of a dam, I distantly remembered from a middle school geography book. I was certain that he was falling for Myra, even though he wasn't quite ready to share this secret liking for me- on the contrary, if it were me, he'd prod and nag and thug like a stubborn child, until I confessed.

But I was proud of myself for acting sensibly by doing the exact opposite.

'Oh, what a relief,' he sighed, gently massaging his temples. Oops, he had let the cat out of the bag, and provided me with the perfect opportunity to catch him.

'Why did it come as a relief? I thought you didn't really care,' I asked mordantly.

I caught him off guard, and this was simply the most exhilarating moment of my life.

‘Well, yes, you’re right. I don’t care at all. I was just concerned for the general welfare of your friend,’ he conjured.

‘Oh really? General welfare at 2 am? Go fool someone else Alex,’ I laughed.

‘Alright I like her. That’s what you wanna hear, then listen. I like her. Every single part of her. Even though I haven’t spent a lot of time, her actions, expressions, thoughts everything is so alluring’ he cried his heart out.’

‘At last,’ I muttered.

‘But, ^{J4}Rachel, why did you lie to me in the first place?’ he asked, with a look so guileless, so impotent that I actually felt like a terrible person.

‘To provide the fuelling force for you to think about my friend’s general welfare. That’s exactly why I kept you up until 2 am,’ was my matter of fact, mirthless reply.

‘Come on, I know that’s the most preposterous one could ever think of. But you caught me so quickly, I couldn’t come up with anything else.’

‘Should’ve thought about that before making your sweet Myra giggle with that Aunt Lydia story,’ I replied sardonically but with a pleasant temperament.

‘What’s why you’re mad, Rachel?’

‘Figure it out for yourself,’ I replied blandly before getting up, but this time he took hold of my elbow and pulled me towards him.

It was the best feeling in the world: to be wrapped up in the protective embrace of someone who was not only your brother, but your closet friend and best interpreter of your mind.

‘I’m very sorry. I didn’t know it would hurt you like this. It was meant to be a joke,’ he said, while stroking my hair and kissing me on the top of my head.

‘It’s alright. Anyway, we’re both even now,’ I said with a devilish grin.

‘Yes, so I shouldn’t be apologizing then.’

‘You’re in for an offense you can’t extenuate like this,’ I stated

‘Then what exactly will I have to do?’ he asked with a discreet look- he looked like a child eager to obtain his teacher’s goodwill and appraisal- I sometimes did pity him a lot; he was too innocent, too easy to hurt, too easy to betray, and too easy to delude. But this Alex-so characteristically, resoundingly, Alex.

‘Make me breakfast tomorrow before leaving.’

‘Sure, if you’re ready to have breakfast made at 5 am. It’ll be as cold as ice by the time you wake up.’

‘Then wake me up at 5. I’ll eat and go back to sleep.’

‘Sure,’ he replied. Though, I was certain, under his breath he cursed the day I was born.

8. Moving into the greatest Deception.

Since the day I saw dad with that woman, I started harboring an acute, abhorrent feeling for everything related to him. I understood that I couldn't act rebelliously to show that I shared his secret, because any display of animosity would lead to mum raising a few eyebrows- I couldn't muster the courage to go and tell her to her face 'Mum, dad kissed a lady last night'- She would have never believed me.

Instead, I decided to deal with the whole situation differently: I found ways to distant myself from dad. Whenever I'd see his face, the entire compendium of memories would start dancing in front of my eyes, just like smooth projected images capering about on a wall. Though my ways of avoiding him, and manifesting a portion of the rapidly mounting aversion inside me, I _____ was pretty sure they were enough to convey my message.

For instance, I'd get ready before he'd come to my bedroom to wake me up for school. On days when mum was out of town, working on some exhaustive divorce or family case, and he'd be home early to fix us dinner, I refused to eat the typical pesto or sandwiches he'd make. Instead, I'd retreat to my room with a glass of chocolate milk.

On most mornings, I'd simply refuse his offer to drive us to school; I preferred my cycle or request Becca's mum for a lift- much to Becca's chagrin; anyway, she wasn't that hostile back then- the sight of each other was bearable, if not pleasant.

One Sunday morning, he came to my room asking whether I'd like to play tennis with him. I, of course, immediately refused. My refusal did startle him a little, and with that same nonplussed look, he continued to stare at me. I kept my eyes down, focusing on the loom bands I was making- which were a massive trend during those days- and tried my best not to start a conversation. But instead of leaving, he walked in and sat on my bed.

'Rachel, sweetheart, is everything alright?' I didn't reply, but only nodded my head to indicate I was in the mood of conversing with him.

'I've been observing you for the past few days, and matter-of-factly, you've been acting very strangely. Is there something bothering you? He asked, while tugging wisps of hair behind my ears._____

Again, I didn't reply.

'Is it somebody at school or did Alex say something?' Now I looked at him directly in the eye, my raging glaze sharply focusing on his ice blue pupils.

I wanted to shout out all sorts of profanities an eight-year-old could possibly think of, yank the sparsely present hair out of his head, and punch him hard in the chest. How easy it was to do something unacceptable and ask whether other things were bothering me? Had he really been imbecile enough to think he could bring a woman home and kiss her and no one would get to know? What was the need of feigning loyalty to mum? There were so many things I wanted to spit out, but I couldn't; maybe I lacked the vocabulary to give voice to

my thoughts in the best way possible, or maybe I couldn't summon the courage to admit I'd been up late snooping when I should've been in bed.

Either way, I couldn't bring myself to do what I intended to do- even if I pictured archetypal things that actually work to bolster some people's courage: picturing yourself with an army and your opponent lying absolutely vanquished in the middle of the battlefield; Or thinking about the great doldrums of your life- they actually give you courage.

So, if I couldn't do what I intended to do, then what did I do? The answer is pretty simple: I gave into my weaknesses. I let the indomitable force responsible for weakening me subdue my willpower. I showed dad the eight-year-old child I really was, behind that masquerade of a fuming, indignant adult.

So I started weeping. I cried so loudly, so hysterically, so profoundly that my entire chest throbbed in and out, accentuating the hunch back I'd got a few years ago- I'd actually found it pretty funny to be called the hunch back of Notre Dame at school. But that wasn't the reason I was wailing, right?

I cried because I was weak; the façade of audacity had so mercilessly been shattered into a thousand glass splinters.

'Rachel, my princess, dad's got you. Dad has your back. Don't you worry, just tell me who's bothering you?' he began his long string of consolations, while pulling me into his arms and gently putting his head on mine.

‘Dad...dddddd I... I, umm, know something bad,’ I mumbled incoherently between sobs.

‘Yes, Rachel, I’m listening.’

Complete silence.

For a moment, I contemplated telling him that he was a fiend who’d break mum’s heart, but something stopped me. Something that has always made me feel like a lump of clammy soil that can easily be molded and transformed, and even flattened to a thin indistinguishable layer, pressing deep into even thicker layers of its own kind- if you made a tractor move over it. Just like that lump of earth, I lacked rigidity too.

No matter how hard I tried to construct an unyielding inner part, the part that couldn’t afford a swerve from your original course of action, I was as easy to squish_____ and transform as a piece of play dough. Maybe that’s how all eight-year-olds are; you can’t expect an eight-year-old to be resolute and robust, but I was far below the average line. A tincture of fear or grief or apprehension would strike me, and there I was, already metamorphosing into some weak, incapacitated figure. I didn’t tell dad the truth.

In fact, I managed to fabricate the weirdest explanation ever.

‘Dad everybody has been ignoring me. Mum’s barely at home, you come back late, and Alex can’t think of anything except his football matches. I feel so left out.’

He pulled me out of his arms where I’d been crying all this time with my head down, and upon sitting up

straight, I realized I'd left a big shapeless blotch across his polo shirt.

'I'm so sorry you had to feel this way. You know, mum and I are really stressed out nowadays, but I'll promise to come home early from now on and so will mum. Plus, we all are going on vacation this summer, and you get to choose the place.'

'Thanks dad! I love you,' I exclaimed.

'That's my girl,' he hugged me. 'By the way, the tennis match offer is still valid,' he smiled.

'Down in ten minutes,' I replied gleefully.

By then I had almost let go of the cloud of negative thoughts hovering over my mind. It must be a delusion, or I must be hallucinating, I reasoned with myself. Even if it was true, dad must have been severely drunk, and I'm sure he's regretting what he did. I found a thousand different explanations to vindicate dad, though my mind continuously fought with these concoctions, maybe because it was repeatedly reminded by my eyes and ears that what they'd heard and seen was irrefutably true. Nevertheless, I didn't give those nights events much thought because it was two months until we were going on vacation, and I'd already decided on Ibiza. The remaining two months until the school term ended did pass by quickly, and we did go to Ibiza the following June.

I was rapturous and going wild with excitement, especially because most of the girls in my class had already been there, and I was finally going to bring

pack a whole portfolio of pictures to show off. It's one of those childhood memories that lay sowed inside my mind. The villa that we'd rented stood on a cliff overlooking the pale blue sea- the sea wasn't exactly blue, but an iridescent combination of dark green and blue. The view from the villa was so tranquil, offering a picturesque sight of distant lush green islets and small boats adrift around them.

I remember sitting near my bedroom window all day long, staring at those boats and sketching images, to show them to my only friend at school, Emma.

Mum seemed particularly relieved and more euphoric than she'd ever been- though dad claimed to manage more than fifty percent of the firm's cases, it was mum who had to bear the brunt of the astronomical increase in cases. Thus, I felt really proud of myself for choosing a vacation spot that had filled everybody with sheer blissfulness.

For the two months we spent in Spain, we methodically followed a regime we all had come to greatly enjoy. Waking up at eight in the morning, we'd have pancakes loaded with berries of all sorts: blueberries, raspberries, strawberries, and cranberries. Dad would make pancakes whereas mum would make creamy lattes for us; then we'd either go for a swim or boating, and mum usually lay on a beach mat in her cute, girlish bikinis for a tan. Her pale skin turned a beautiful olive brown texture, and the glow on her face made men turn their faces and gape. Then we'd go for a stroll down in the town center, often munching on seafood, which tasted horrible- though I liked the prawns and pasta dishes we

had at different restaurants for dinner. Finally, we'd come home at around seven am, and watch movies until midnight. The snacks available in town didn't match our tastes, so we snacked on things mum had managed to bring along: Weetabix crackers, Meridian peanut butter, and Monster Munch.

One night during our last few days, a strange thing happened. Though our villa stood on a secluded cliff perilously bordering the shoreline, and was about thirty-seven kilometers from the town center, a short, plump Irishman managed to enter its vicinity.

He was heavily drunk, his hair was disheveled, his eyes crimson red, and his entire body reeked of whiskey. He had a pistol in one hand. We were having a barbecue outside, when he came running into the lawn, hollering like a maniac, and directly pointing the pistol at dad._____

'Where is my wife?' he bellowed.

'What? She must be at home, mate. We ain't got your wife here,' dad replied in a shaky voice, though he tried to mask courage by pushing me and Alex behind him.

'I saw her coming towards this side, moron,' he shouted.

The nerves near his temples were on the verge of bursting.

'This is private property we've rented. No trespassing here. You must have had a dream. Now you better get going, before I kick the shit out of you.'

'I ain't a fool. Bring out my wife or I'll shoot. Ten... nine...eight,' he started his countdown.

I was already tearing up, and Alex hugged me tightly, squeezing my head into his already too broad chest in order to block my view.

‘Shhh you’re a brave girl, Rachel. It’s gonna be alright,’ he murmured in my ear. Just then, mom stepped out of the kitchen door, with four cans: two cokes and two vodka sodas.

‘Darling, is the food...,’ but she stopped halfway in between.

Dropping the cans to the floor, she rushed towards us and stood next to dad, who immediately pushed her behind him.

‘What in the world is going on?’ she whispered in dad’s ear.

¹⁰³
‘Dunno, this insane man is asking for his lost wife,’ dad replied turning behind towards Alex and me. We were standing close, clutched to each other with terror-struck expressions; mum grabbed each of us by the shoulders and pulled us close behind her.

So now, we looked like primary school kids playing that quintessential train- chain game. With dad in front, mum standing closely behind him, and we both clustered behind her back, we formed a perfect protection chain. Obviously dad was at the forefront in the most vulnerable position, but I sought comfort in the fact that Alex and I had a fairly protective layer in front of us, thus we wouldn’t succumb to death immediately, or at least painfully- though I immediately dismissed

the notion when I actually envisioned my parents' dead bodies intertwined with each other.

'See! I told ya, my wife's here. Come out here, darling,' he exclaimed while pointing towards mum.

'I'm not your bloody fucking wife!' mum shouted at the top of her voice.

'This is my wife. Now leave us alone and get out of here!' dad raged.

I had never seen him this angry. 'Darling, is this because I didn't leave any pasta for you. I thought you were on a diet. Besides, isn't hiding behind another man too much of revenge?' the man began to prattle.

'I think he's senile,' mum uttered with gritted teeth .

The man was about to move closer, perhaps to take_____ mum's hand, which he obviously couldn't, given that dad's tall frame stood against his barely five feet tall figure-unless he pulled the trigger, of course.

Just then, a large object, presumably a stone or a metal piece, hit him on the back with a thudding sound, and he moaned so loudly that even the birds resting on tree branches flew off in a panic to retreat to a safer, more quiet place.

'What the fucking,' he turned around with gun his pointed towards his attacker, but immediately dropped it as if he'd seen a strict middle school headmaster.

A tall woman with long, slender legs and a sleek, seductive frame appeared from somewhere out of the darkness. She was a ravishing brunette, with large

espresso- hazelnut eyes, full lips, and high cheekbones; the genetic code was undeniably Spanish or maybe Brazilian, and I could have never guessed that this Sophia Vergara look alike was this curmudgeon's wife.

'How many times do I have to tell you not to leave the house when you're drunk?' she snapped, while hitting him hard on the back of his bald head- like a stressed out mother disciplines her naughty one when he gets lost in a crowd while playing.

'But darling, you were missing,' came a tremulous reply, for this rowdy fellow had immediately transitioned from an uproarious monster to a demure mouse- it was as if this man was afraid of evens his wife's blink. Her intimidating nature coupled with her ability to control the dullard standing in front of us, earned her a ten out of ten from me.

'I think I wasn't clear enough last night,' she shouted.

'I'm not your mummy whose gonna sit near you, and sing lullabies all day, every day. I'm a busy woman, and if by chance, I'm not available, you can't trespass into other people's property hollering and disturbing them,' she scowled.

We all were simply in awe of this woman.

'But I thought you were,' the man muffled something, but his wife cut in, 'shut up, not a single more word.'

She then covered the little distance between her and where we all were clustered, and addressing mum and dad at the same time, she said,

‘I’m incredibly sorry. I’m so ashamed. He must have mistaken the dresses,’ she said, while gesturing towards mum’s sea green strap dress; coincidentally, she was wearing the same color.

‘It’s alright, though it was a bit of a scene,’ dad said.

‘I apologize again. This man’s giving me a bit of a tough time,’ she said, while glowering towards her stupor afflicted husband.

‘It’s alright,’ mum nodded understandably.

‘Shall we make leave, or you intend to spend the rest of the night here?’ she gruffed.

Then pulling him by his arm, she made her half-conscious husband get up to his feet, and started dragging him in the most abrasive manner I’d ever seen a woman do so. She’d only covered a few steps, when she lurked out of the engulfing darkness just to retrieve something she’d thrown earlier- something that had evoked an earth- shattering moan: a pointed, three inch black stiletto. When they’d left and the upheaval was finally over, we all heaved a sigh of relief and decided to call it a day. On our way back inside the villa, we were so busy checking all the locks and pulling down the shutters, we’d totally forgotten about the hamburger patties charring outside. The next few days passed in a humdrum routine, and it wasn’t long before we packed our bags and arrived back home.

Things continued as normal: school started, both mum and dad returned to work, my late night sessions with churlish Juliette begun. Though those nocturnal

sessions of stressing and wailing, did continue until mum came back- I had understood they had taken on an incessant nature, at least until I wasn't past middle school, and would gradually exist to define my childhood memories- Otherwise, life was progressing fairly smoothly, and I found little reason to cry and let the vulnerable part of myself activate- until one day.

The day when everything- buried deep underneath the ocean bed- floated to the top, and I changed completely as a child- in fact, after that day I was no longer a child- I had the mind and conundrums of a fully grown woman, who, paradoxically, was still an eight- about to be nine- year old little girl.

So what happened? Well, nothing which I hadn't imagined in my wildest dreams. Everything I'd spent hours thinking about was gradually coming true. It was _____ as if some external force with magnificent powers, could fathom what my childish mind tried to concoct, and would then use all its powers to take out that concoction out of my imagination, and throw it into an abyss which eventually lead to reality.

So one late afternoon, mum was at work as usual, Alex was at his friend's place, I cycled back home from Emma's house two streets away. Her mum would usually pick me on Wednesdays, and we'd go to a park, and we'd get ice cream from Sheer Delights afterwards. I was astounded to see dad's car parked in the driveway. Four thirty and he's already home? I thought. Anyway, I decided to give him a good scare. So, making my bicycle lean against our entrance fence, I ran all the

way towards the back of the house and sneaked in through the kitchen door.

I glanced around, and since I couldn't find him in the kitchen, I tiptoed up the stairs towards his bedroom. But the moment I was about to touch his doorknob, my heart stopped. Yes, it may be thought of as a hyperbole, but my heart really stopped. It didn't just stop working altogether: there were palpitations, then a rapid plummeting feeling, and finally a complete halt.

My mind, through all the memories made and time spent wallowing in Ibiza, raced back to only one event stowed in mind months ago. Coquettish laughter. Moving of stools. Impeccable blow-dried hair. Smooth skin. Deep red lipstick.

I wanted to scream. Scream so loud that the glass windows would shatter into a million shards, creaks would appear in the walls and the bricks would start dismantling, and the chandelier hanging right on top of the bed would descend rapidly downwards, right on top of their foolish heads- and boom, it would all end. There and then. Their secret, the illicit activities, clandestine meetings, obscene touching of bodies, treachery, treason- everything would end, buried deep underneath the crushing weight of debris.

But I could only wish it happened, because it didn't. The sparkling and erotic acts progressed on without the slightest interruption; the moans and heavy sounds of panting didn't stop flowing out of the narrow opening of the door left ajar. And there I was, hunkered down on the floor, with my chin pressed in between my knees,

once again witnessing something I should have never ever seen.

From my spying vantage point, I saw clothes- all kinds of clothes- strewn all over the floor. A pair of black pumps, which were gaudily embellished with sequins on the sides, tossed on the floor- they were quite far apart: one was lying underneath the bed and the other near the door where I was sitting in a squat position. It seemed as if they were thrown with the intention of hurting someone, just like you hurl projectiles out of a cannon towards a venomous enemy. I couldn't really see what was going on under the covers, but from the squeaking of the mattress, the groans, and the erratic patterns of breathing, my eight-year-old mind figured out it was definitely something unpleasant and forbidden- the kind of things mum used to skip when we were watching a movie together.

But then I heard a giggling sound, one which I heard months ago, and still made my ears furl up in revulsion and rejection, like the very first time.

'It's been a while,' said that woman with a grisly laugh.

'I know, I've missed you terribly my love.'

My love?

Tears began to collect in the corner of my eyes. Was dad really some otherworldly apparition? A ghoulish figure, maybe? He masqueraded as an endearing father and loyal husband, but he wasn't either of them- not a loyal husband at least. This infernal creature who'd taken a human form to live among us, was definitely

good at pretense, which I now believed, was a prerequisite for living in our world.

This monster needed a home, a family, a shoulder to cry on, emotional support, and just for the sake of these requirements, he'd taken up a family and spared no effort in displaying solicitude in manifold ways. I needed no further evidence to believe that my entire life had been a subterfuge- a well-executed one, indeed.

Everything, from all the memories made together, to the endless support that came from dad in times of need and otherwise, was thoroughly wrapped in wool made up of falsehood and lies; he became his real self only when he was around this woman whose name I couldn't remember.

¹¹⁰
'Alright, stop, it's enough,' she said with a little gasp.

This immediately caught my attention. Though my monster-dad conception was neither banal nor ludicrous, I decided to dismiss it for the time being to focus on what was really going on. After all, I needed to abstract as much information from as possible, in order to fortify the billow of vague thoughts in my mind. So rising to my meet, I pressed myself against the wall surrounding the door frame, and tilted my upper body, so my head peaked through the narrow opening in the door. And there they were: my very prudent father and that woman whose name I recalled as Inez, naked, their bare bodies entwined, hands clasped, and expressions indecipherable. Dad was doing something under the covers that made her laugh. They constantly moved

and rolled around, which made the mattress squeak even more fiercely, and I just wished it'd break and they both land on the floor.

For a fleeting second, I contemplated banging the bedroom door and walking in. Then I'd just stare at her caught-red-handed expressions, waiting for an explanation, or even better, launch myself on that shameless woman. But I couldn't because the repercussions would have been too severe. Contrary to the guilt ridden dad I was picturing, I feared he would be so enraged that he might start scolding or worse hitting me in front of that stranger- though he never laid a finger on me. Therefore, I ran.

I practically sprinted across the hallway, and toppled a vase, which luckily did not break. Claspings the long railing of the spiraling staircase with my sweaty hands, I scurried downstairs, scuttling across the living room and the kitchen area, and pushed myself out through the kitchen door; it was then when I could finally breathe and the tears came out, rushing down my burning cheeks, leaving them clammy and itchy.

Taking hold of a stone from the rocky pavement along the main curved pathway, I aimed it hard and straight towards the bedroom window, and I was damn lucky because it was an eagle eye shot. The stone hit it right in the center, creating a paradigm of expanding concentric circles whose diameter increased proportionally as the distance from the epicenter increased- I really deserved a nice little treat.

Then, without turning back for a millisecond, I pictured myself as the leading participant of the New York marathon, and ran and ran until my legs threatened me to break if I didn't stop. I was, without doubt, somewhere really far away, away from that sickening sight, but I really wasn't. I maybe have been standing in an expansive field, under the relentlessly vast sky, feeling stranded and lost, but the truth was that the proximity was simply too difficult to overcome. No matter how detached my mind's sailboat was, no matter how many anchors and ropes you removed to push it far away from the mooring, it would go adrift, but then like an obedient pet return to the harbor. That is exactly what my mind was like. The sights, sounds, and smell would never leave me, or my mind would never leave them to be exact- it would moor back, perfectly and timely, until it was completely anchored to the harbor my dad had created. So, that is it.

That's how I came to define myself as a seed who couldn't bloom, despite being provided with the finest nourishment. A pest would always remain in my mind and hamper every trajectory I would take for the rest of my life. But that day, I also became the star I mentioned earlier. Well that theory isn't entirely correct, and one might say that it's based entirely on fallacy and delusions, but I can never extricate it from reality.

All this time, dad was aware he had a partner in this secret keeping task. He knew, from the beginning -from that day in the pantry when it all started- but he chose to keep quiet. He never confronted me, maybe out of

mortification or rage, but he just let things go on the way they were.

Here dad acted like those myriads of stars who were aware of the lurking catastrophe, just like dad was aware of the apocalyptic darkness I was falling into after I discovered his extramarital affair, but he chose to let me suffer just like that star that was left to face the might of the approaching meteor..

9. An interlude of Magic

‘I really liked your presentation. That Malcolm X part was what really caught my attention.’

‘Thank you, I really appreciate it,’ I said, trying my best to make small talk.

‘Did you do it yourself?’

‘Do what?’ I asked

‘The presentation, of course,’ he said.

‘Yes I think you pretty much saw me delivering it. Besides, what makes you think I didn’t? Not all blondes are dumb,’ I retorted.

‘Relax. I’m not accusing you of plagiarism or something. Your presentation just happens to be quite similar to Myra’s,’ he replied with a quick little laugh.

‘This isn’t your problem! And yes, our presentations were similar because I made both of them. Myra was down with fever, so I spent six bloody hours completing the two,’ I snapped.

‘Well, then you should’ve considered making a few changes here and there. Just a little piece of advice for the future,’ he said casually.

‘What the hell is your problem?’

Then I turned around and saw this miscellaneous guy talking to me from behind for the first time. What an odd face he has, I thought. With shoulder-length dark brown hair, a square shaped face, a snobby nose, and a pair of spectacles, he looked like a greatly transformed version of Tom Hiddleston, one which would make people wonder if by chance, he was his younger brother or kin.

I was on my period, which meant that I was more irascible than I usually was. Though the professor and everybody else in the room, had thoroughly praised me for the concision and relevance of my work, this man was adamant on taking out as many flaws as possible.

Maybe he’s jealous, I thought. Or maybe he just wants to talk to a girl, who would want to talk to a geek like him?

‘Are you jealous because you were appreciated as much as I was?’ I said with a snigger.

‘What makes you think I am?’ he said with a wide amused smile.

‘You can’t seem to digest the professor’s kind remarks’ I scorned

And he immediately started laughing. He was loud that the professor delivering the lecture got angry and asked us to leave.

‘See, I missed my class just because of you,’ I shouted as soon as we were out.

‘Who’s going to lend me their notes?’

‘Don’t worry. I’ll ask one of my mates to email them. We didn’t miss much, trust me,’ he replied with an irritating nonchalance.

‘I doubt you have any mates,’ I laughed a little churlishly.

‘That’s not a very nice thing to say.’ He was genuinely offended.

‘Alright I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to cause umbrage. But just stop following me, will you?’

‘I’m not following you. We both happen to be headed to the same place,’ he said guilelessly._____

I stopped in the middle of the corridor.

‘Alright, you go first,’ I said.

‘As you wish. But don’t worry about the lecture notes.’
And he was off.

I immediately disliked him for the casualness with which he treated every single thing. Let alone getting lecture notes from him.

‘Some people are just born to be jerks,’ I murmured, and then head off to look for Myra.

The fact Myra wasn’t willing to disclose any single thing, wasn’t a hyperbole, but a deeply embedded reality. It happened that I really didn’t know where she

worked. Despite our day-to-day encounters, daily visits to coffee shops, and endless chatting, I was as ignorant as a newborn child.

Maybe because she adeptly changed the topic of our conversations whenever she had to disclose something, or I became a bit too garrulous while discussing familial matters that I didn't give her a chance to speak. Anyway, she was at work, so I decided to go home instead.

When I reached my apartment door, I don't know why I was aghast to see a pile of clothes of all sorts- pink, black, and red bras; denim shorts- the ones that are purposely extra cut to put your bum cheeks on display- as well as jeans and pants; on top was a pile of cardigans and a note that read: **thought my poor friend would be needing clothes, so here you are! Lots of them, which I think will be enough for this year. But don't worry. My next year's clearance stock goes to you, too. God bless, my poor friend. Lots of love, Becca.**

Obviously, she couldn't see the gaiety look I'd taken on ever since I befriended Myra. She was burning inside, so she was continuously looking for ways to ignite a fire inside me. But I knew how to deal with her- Myra had lectured me on how to take it easy with a pain in the ass like her. So that's exactly what I did. On the same note, I wrote down: **How thoughtful. God bless your soul, my life. Your loving neighbor, Rachel.**

Putting the heap of garments into a large black bag, I decided to pay a visit to the thrift shop and give away

this generous gift along with the bag mum had dropped to be given away. The nearest thrift shop was two streets towards away on the back of my apartment complex, opposite Tesco Extra, but it was still a gruesome walk. Hauling the two bags along, I let out a sigh of relief upon entering the small store, but gasped when I saw the person standing behind the counter: Myra!

I wasn't surprised to see her at the cash counter, as I already knew that she worked somewhere, but the coincidence and predestined overlapping fates was what really threw me off balance.

No matter how much she tried to keep things under the cover, fate would remove it, and I'd see what was inside. I almost felt like laughing.

¹¹⁷
'Oh,' I said.

'Oh,' she repeated.

'Here you are. I was looking for you.'

'Why?' she gave me that skeptical look for hers

'What do you mean why? Aren't you longing for a little chit-chat?'

'Yeah sure. I'm always up. I'll be off work in thirty minutes, then we can go to that Turkish diner you were talking about that day'

'Sounds great. Plus, I brought a something Becca gifted me this afternoon. Lots of designer clothes.'

'Really? Don't tell me they're all new, otherwise I'm keeping some,' Myra said incredulously.

Upon peeking inside, and taking a look, she realized how new they were.

‘Rachel, those white pants have got period stains on them!’ she exclaimed.

‘Couldn’t expect anything less,’ I replied apathetically.

‘But I didn’t expect this from you, Rachel. You should’ve gone through the pile before bringing them here. It’s a thrift shop not a garbage dump,’ she raged.

‘Hey, alright I’m sorry. I didn’t check. Just take out the respectable ones, and I’ll take care of the rest.’

When Myra was done with her shift, we walked back to my apartment and I threw the unacceptable items in the trash can- that was it. I simply didn’t care where they’d go, I just had to get rid of them.

Around seven, we got ready; Myra put on a black skirt and a navy blue blouse, which she matched with leather boots, whereas I wore a black bra top with matching pants and a leather coat- it was our girls’ night out, and it was the first time I was really looking forward to it.

‘Why do you always make me feel as if I lack style?’ I jested.

‘I should be the one saying that because I’ve never seen you wearing anything except Stella McCartney and Victoria Beckham.’

‘Come on, Myra. Don’t act as you’re a Primark lover.’

‘I actually do go to Primark, Rachel,’ she said a bit gravely.

I had such a damned sense of humor. People never got my wit in the right way. Everything meant to be discreet ended up being offensive. But I wouldn't let anything ruin the night; I was in the mood to have fun, lots of fun, indeed

'Alright, forget about it. Let's go,' I said, pulling her along and slamming the door loudly- I tried my best to deprive my grisly neighbor of every moment of peace.

It had started drizzling nearly five minutes after we were on the street. However, the drizzle was light and the splattering sound on the pavement soft and melodious; it was a perfect night to carouse a bit and have the time of your life. Around seven thirty, we reached the newly opened diner, which was a good thirty minutes away. We were slightly wet; our hair were drenched, but clothes perfectly fine- thanks to the raincoats I'd made us put on. After a quick session of drying, we settled for a seat in the corner and placed our order; I opted for a long rectangular dish of minced meat flatbread and Myra went for the Doner Kebab.

This time, however, she insisted on paying and I let her- my monthly funds hadn't arrived anyway.

'You know, I'm just exhausted of life, Rachel. I feel like escaping to some distant place, to the Alps maybe, and never ever coming back.'

I gave her a bland vacuous look.

Those words seemed so strange and totally inharmonious with her past, as well as present ebullient disposition. If she'd really been in a deep problem,

she'd certainly be lacking the gaiety with which she managed to uplift everybody around her. She was acting as if she had five toddlers to look after, and was already pregnant with her sixth child.

'Come on, Myra. You sound like a woman with ten kids and a paralyzed husband. You're a beautiful, young woman. Just sit back and loosen up a bit,' I bantered.

'Yeah I guess you're right. Just too much stress nowadays,' she said with immeasurable resignation.

That is when I realized I was acting like a total idiot by putting by so incredibly dull and useless witticism to use.

'Hey, listen, Myra. I need you to know that I'm always there for you. No matter what happens, I'll always have your back. You can share anything with me, literally_____ anything.'

'Even if I have ten kids hidden somewhere, who are waiting for me to come home and cook for them?'

'And a bedridden, paralyzed husband,' I added.

Then we laughed continuously for the next ten minutes, because the joke was genuinely funny and we both could picture the other stuck in a similar scenario.

Our regaling was, however, short-lived, because food shortly after words, and eyeing my extra-large oblong meat pie, Myra said,

'Rachel, you'll definitely be needing some help finishing that up. I'm here for your assistance.'

Ugh, just because she paid the bill today, I thought. We talked for hours and hours, and consequently lost track of time. We had no intention of moving until the manager came up, and brusquely told us to our face that we'd ordered enough diet cokes and mint margaritas, and it was time to leave. Mimicking the manager, we laughed as if we'd drunk a dozen bottles of vodka- though we didn't have any.

'Must have been the meat pie, Myra,' I chuckled.

'Bloody chef must have put in cocaine instead of pepper. No wonder I was wondering why the food tasted like raw meat,' I said a bit deliriously.

'Food was pretty palatable. It's just how it tastes. That friend of yours, what was her name?'

'Becca. And she's a fiend, not a friend.'

'Yeah, yeah, whatever. I was thinking she cast some kind of spell on us because it's impossible to drift into unconsciousness after having a seamlessly harmless kebab and meat pie,' Myra insinuated.

'Might be possible. Busty, old Becca preparing delirium inducing potions in her cauldron. I like the idea,' I said, fully amused.

'Ladies, please leave now,' a voice poked from behind.

We both turned around to see that short, grumpy manager, with a vexed look on his face, scanning our empty table to allude that it was time to leave.

'Shut up, you Doner Kebab,' Myra snapped.

‘Why should we spend a single more minute here? Let’s go, Rachel,’ Myra vociferated.

When we finally out in the drizzle that had abated to occasional drops, we again started laughing.

‘That was rude, Myra.’

‘It just came out unintentionally. I didn’t mean to sound impolite,’ she said artlessly.

‘Yeah, I know you’re pretty helpless when it comes to your disposition to blurt out things.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Never mind. Let’s go get cinnamon buns,’ I placated.

‘Are you still mad about our first encounter?’

‘What? No, I was just....’ My quest for a rational_____ explanation immediately ended, as her phone began to incessantly ring, and after ignoring the first two bells, she decided to take it.

‘Yes, Jake, is everything alright?’ The man on the phone said something which made the color on her face change.

‘What the fuck? I pay those goddamn guys. How is this even....,’ but the man on the phone had already hung up.

‘Myra, what’s wrong?’

‘Rachel, I just... I can’t explain. But just come with me, I need your help,’ she said.

She then started to frantically run backwards, in the same direction where we'd just come from, past the Turkish diner and a pub, until she reached the end of the street.

'Wait for me. Slow down. My legs aren't as long as yours,' I yelled, while trying to catch my breathe, and looking sideways for drunkards eyeing my juggling boobs.

I hadn't worn the bra top to juggle my boobs on the street at such an ungodly hour.

When we'd reached the end, we took a sort of U- turn and started ascending a narrow and relatively elevated alley which lead us to the main road. This tawdry hilly area, which was apparently part of London, was one of the obscurest places I'd ever seen. In fact, it was hard to believe that it was part of London- London is a big city after all, and living on the upscale elite side, there were many deplorable residential area I had yet to explore. When we'd climbed the dark alley, we stood on one end of the main road and apparently had to run across it to reach the row of minuscule, unbearably overcrowded, thoroughly dilapidated houses. All of them looked similar, except for differences in the extent of deterioration in terms of broken doors, scraped off paint, tenaciously balanced wooden roofs, and tumbledown walls.

Taking hold of my hand, she shouted, 'One, two, three', and we ran across the street without being hit by the relentlessly incoming speedy vehicles.

‘Myra, can you please explain why we’re acting like absolute maniacs at this time of the night. We were supposed to be getting cinnamon...’ but Myra cut in.

This time she didn’t give some witty response, in fact she shouted loudly, rampantly, and frenetically.

‘You’re stuck in this lunacy because I’ve been kicked out by the woman whose house I live in, even though I’m a bloody tenant and work hard to pay the unreasonable amount she charges me!’

I gave her a long unremitting stare. I’d never ever thought that the waters were that high above Myra’s head. Frankly, mum and dad had provided us with everything, and we never had to think about issues like accommodation and rent. Even before we got the chance to talk about it, mum and dad did what they we’re supposed to do-that’s what that they were telling us since childhood. When Alex graduated and went off to university, he got a flat and a car and similar was my case- well, the car was still on hold, and I’d been prodding dad to book me one. So that was how it worked for us- a few months of nagging and you’d get what you want.

The enormity of her predicament hit me just then, and I felt awful. Practically, if the woman, Myra was referring to as her resident- landlord, continued to move along obstinate lines Myra would be on the road, or worse, begging the manager of the Turkish restaurant- she’d blatantly called a ‘kebab’- for accommodation. But I couldn’t let that happen; she’d been there for me when I needed her, so how could I just walk away, leaving her

to grapple with her own problems? Every part of my anatomy was fuming, and I was ready to fight this landlord if needed.

‘Listen to me, Myra,’ I said, while looking at her directly in the eye- our three-inch difference meant I needed a good deal of sight elevation.

‘I’m not leaving you here alone. There’s no need to worry. We’re going to convince her, you’ll see,’ I tried my best to allay her frayed nerves.

‘I know,’ she replied. Although she was a fighter, and she wasn’t going to give up that easily, I could see small droplets already collecting in the corner of her eyes.

‘Let’s go and beat the living daylights out of her,’ I said.

¹²⁵
As I had expected, Myra lived in the most decrepit town house at the end of the row. Rushing towards the house, we quickly covered the few steps at the entrance, and when I raised my balled fist to start banging, Myra hushed me and said, ‘Shhh I’ve got the key.’

‘What’s the hell is the problem, then? I asked.

But before she could do any further explaining, we were inside the town house, which was further divided into small apartments. It was just like a small apartment complex, with numerous white doors on all around you and a staircase in the middle- which meant more apartments on the top floor. This complex was already so small, imagine the size of a living quarter, I

thought. You could barely move without colliding your butt with each other.

We climbed the stairs, and my foot was still on the last step, when I could see Myra's things scattered all over the floor. The very first door, just a little distance away from the staircase was Myra's I realized.

'What in the world? How dare she throw your things?' I raged, while bending down to pick them up.

Myra was seething.

'This is the door we gotta bang,' she roared, while gesticulating me to take the lead.

'I'm on it.'

Then with all my might, I smacked the door so fiercely that I feared it might break and fall on top of us._____

'Whose dick is on fire?' somebody barked from inside. Before I could think of an equally vitriolic reply, I found myself standing face to face with a sturdy, red-faced man who had ginormous tattooed arms and piercings just above his eyebrows.

'Did somebody piss in your cheerios, kiddo?' he asked peevishly.

'Worse than that. Who in the world allowed you to throw my friend's stuff outside, when she pays you to live here? I retorted.

'You're pretty sharp tongued for your age, aren't you?'

'Answer my question.'

Just then another short fat lady appeared at the door. She had ginger and orange colored hair, at which I contorted my face in disgust. With a saggy protruding belly and a ruddy complexion, she resembled the pompous, depraved Mrs. Bumblebee in Oliver Twist. I could almost picture poor Myra being denied food just like Oliver Twist, and this Mrs. Bumblebee look alike tormenting her mercilessly; the sheer thought of it made me giggle.

‘Why are you pestering us at this time?’ she barked.

‘Mrs. Barnett, I live her I guess,’ Myra replied patiently.

‘Well, not anymore. Don’t you have any idea, ten days have already passed and you haven’t paid me this month’s rent yet. And you owe me one quarter of last month’s as well,’ she replied matter-of-factly.

‘But I requested you for time and you agreed. It’s just a matter of days and then...’ reasoned Myra in a quivering voice.

She was distressed and virtually on the brink of breaking into tears. She repeatedly cracked her knuckles and pushed back her hair. I gently patted her back for support

‘Don’t worry, Myra, we’ll take care of it,’ I said.

‘So without wasting my and your own time, pick up your stuff and get lost,’ she shouted and tried to bang the door, but Myra held it.

‘We’re not leaving ,Mrs. Barnett,’ she declared.

‘Yeah, what you’ve done is unconscionable and you need to apologize. Plus ask this chap of yours to pick up this stuff,’ I added in

‘You spiteful bitch,’ the man scowled.

‘Tell me something I don’t know,’ I shot back.

‘Enough! Myra, pick up your stuff and leave. Besides, I’ve got a tenant coming in tomorrow, your room’s already taken.’

With this she banged the door loudly, and we stood there in silence not knowing whether to curse or ring the bell again for a round of pleading and apologizing.

‘Myra, are you alright?’ She didn’t reply. In fact, she just hunkered down and started picking up her strewn things. That is when I saw a family photograph of Myra standing with two younger boys, both fabulously tanned and tall, and a middle aged woman wearing a dark green cardigan; the picture was however, destroyed at one end: somebody had been cut out, and it wasn’t only the face, but the entire space taken up by that person was cut out and then maybe burnt or discarded. Since the picture did have a motherly figure and kids who couldn’t be anybody else except for her brothers- the resemblance provided irrefutable evidence of similar genetic code- I figured out her father was missing. Well if that’s the case, Myra and I have a lot more talking to do, I thought. I squatted down and helped Myra gather the rest of the things, but she pushed my hand away.

‘It’s alright I’ll manage,’ she said, brushing away tears.

She was weeping, not hysterically or uncontrollably like I do, but the tears were diminutive, both in size and flow, and she turned her head towards the other side to hide her face.

‘It’s fine Myra, you don’t need to hide. We all tear up. It’s perfectly alright if the truth’s out. I know you’re not as thick skinned as you pose to be. Stop tryin’ to act like an iron gate now,’ I jested And thankfully, it didn’t fall flat because she actually laughed.

‘So get up now, we’re leaving,’ I said in an orderly tone.

‘Where?’ she asked confusedly.

‘You’ve seen for yourself that I’m homeless now.’

‘You’re going to live with me from now onwards, drama queen.’

‘Thank you, but I can’t accept the offer, I’m sorry. It’s too much.’

‘Cut it out, Myra. You’re going to live with me at least until you find another decent accommodation. I’m not leaving you here with these hooligans’

Myra didn’t say anything. She just kept looking, maybe out of gratitude or admiration maybe? I didn’t know. I was on top of the world for getting a roommate I often thought of offering a room, but I simply hadn’t got the chance. Now, I was provided with that perfect opportunity, and I wasn’t going to let go.

‘Hurry up, we’re still getting Cinnamon buns tonight,’ I spurred.

Taking hold of one suitcase, I pushed myself through the door, out of the infernal environment into the cool archetypal London air.

‘Time to get out of this garbage dump,’ I muttered to myself.

On my way out, I did chant a little prayer, hoping that Miss Bumblebee’s look alike could never ever have pleasurable sex with her fat man again. That was their punishment for hurting Myra.

ð

That night, after having Hazelnut Cinnamon with coffee, I helped Myra unpack and settle in the room directly opposite mine and then facetimed Alex. It had been weeks since he left, and I missed him dearly. But the major reason for face timing him was something else: _____ the day’s events had been pretty overwhelming, I was emotional, excited, and worn out altogether, and only Alex could help me smoothly sail through this ocean of hysteria I was going through. Checking on Myra, who was fast asleep, I closely shut my door and called Alex.

‘Hey there! What’s up?’ he said in a perky voice, which light up every single dark corner inside me.

‘I’m fine. How about you?’

‘Filling up forms for intern positions this summer. I wanna immediately start working after graduating.’

‘Why don’t you work in our firm?’

‘Oh please, Rachel. You know what I’ll be getting myself into. I want to stay away.’

‘Hmm,’ I nodded my head pensively.

‘By the way, I’ll be visiting you this weekend. You remember, Hardy?’

‘How can I forget?’ After all, he was the only boy who had a crush on me.

‘Well, his brother’s getting married this Saturday. So, is it okay if I come over and stay for a week or so? I can get a room if you aren’t comfortable.’

‘Don’t be silly. You know my dishwasher’s not working anyway,’ I joked

‘Yeah, right.’

Then I told him everything. He was going to be in London in two days anyway, and I could have waited to talk to him face to face, but I couldn’t help it. As I _____ narrated the whole incident, without missing out a single detail, I could see the color of his face change. He grew crimson, the same sombre red that replaced his pale complexion whenever he’d hear stories of injustice and violence.

For a moment, I almost regretted narrating everything in depth. The way his jawline twitched, and he moved his hand over his face again and again, showed that he’d drive to London that very moment and beat the shit out of those people.

‘Oh my God, Rachel, that is awful,’ he exclaimed.. ‘How can somebody even do that? It’s inhuman.’

‘I know right,’ I replied.

‘Where is she now? I hope you didn’t leave her like this,’ he asked impatiently.

There was a strange kind of desperation in his voice- a desperation that had never existed before.

‘She’s at a friend’s place,’ I lied.

I was shrewd enough to lie, because telling him she was living with me meant galvanizing him to drive up to my place at night. I was sure if I told him, I’d find him ringing my bell six am and I didn’t want that because, as I mentioned, there was still a lot of talking to do.

The next morning, I was up before her and headed to the kitchen to make breakfast. It had been a while since I went proper grocery shopping and preferred to bring things in tins and bits, which meant the options were limited. Anyway, I thought about making her a _____ little something since it was her very first day and I wanted to prove how caring I was. But then a dreadful thought crossed my mind; what if she started taking undue advantage of me and expected a warm meal every morning?

Would she just come and sit at the counter everyday waiting for me to offer her breakfast, just because she was a guest? Nay, I know her pretty well, at least well enough not to worry about such issues, I thought. So I went for a can of beans and some bacon I’d long forgotten about.

‘Hey, did you sleep well?’ I asked, as she walked in the kitchen.

‘I slept like a princess,’ she smiled.

‘By the way, why do all the pillows have linen cases? I got a little excited on seeing them.’

‘Ah that’s mum. I told her not to bother, but she wouldn’t listen. Hate to see her act so fastidious sometimes.’

‘Hmm.’

‘Here I made you breakfast, hope you like it,’ I said while pushing the plate towards her.

‘That’s so sweet, but you really shouldn’t bother,’ she replied with a wide grin.

‘Don’t worry, it isn’t happening every day,’ I said while returning her grin with an impish smile.

But she didn’t have a single bit. Then I realized what an idiot I’d been to serve her bacon; she didn’t eat pork_____ or bacon.

‘Oh, I’m sorry, I almost forgot you...’

‘Nay, it’s alright. I don’t have breakfast anyway.’

‘Really? The first thing I do in the morning is head to the kitchen for breakfast, and I’m not gonna lie, but I don’t even check my Instagram before it.’

‘That’s actually the right way,’ she replied flatly.

‘I’ve the coffee maker on. Why don’t you make us both coffee? and add extra cream to my cup, please.’

She got up with a little sigh, as if I’d asked her to start cleaning the apartment. Taking out two mugs, she poured coffee and then with an elaborate display she added cream to my cup, as if to accentuate the

difference between our choices: a plain cup of black coffee and one overloaded with cream. Better get used to her ways, otherwise you'll die out of self-consciousness, I thought.

'Myra, I know something's on your mind. You can tell me everything. Trust me,' I assured her in an attempt to make her open up about her problems.

To my surprise, without a wisp of vacillation, she opened up the worst chapter of her life

'Rachel, I honestly don't know where to start and how much to tell. But let's begin with the part where my dad left us when when I was six years old. He worked for some newspaper company, and as far as mum has revealed, he fell in love with a younger woman. Mum said she was privy to the fact that he was having an affair, and though he knew what mum was aware, he simply refused to talk about it. You know what angers me, Rachel? Mum simply refused to confront. She said their marriage was a terrible mistake and since it was already stumbling on the edge of a cliff, she didn't want to push it any further. She justified herself by saying that she didn't really care about dad's whereabouts because she was strong and independent. Well, not independent enough I'd say; she works in a pharmacy and the meager pay meant money was always an issue. Anyway, it turns out that dad really couldn't control his emotions, so he walked out on us one day. Maybe he got married and started a new family, or maybe he died, who knows? I haven't seen him in years, and I wouldn't really care if I found him dead somewhere. But the real problems began just when he

left. We were a middle class family until then, and enjoyed a fairly comfortable lifestyle, but it was after his departure, money became a burdening conundrum. Mum started working two jobs, and we had to relocate to an even smaller house in an even smaller town. Things have gotten a lot better since I've started working.'

It took a huge amount of self- control not to burst into tears. All my life I had thought my dad was the worst father one could have, because the weight of his deception and the weight of the secret I was still carrying, which couldn't be measured by any scale or by any machine. But did he walk out on us? He continued to care and provide for his family, but never brought a full stop to those rendezvous meetings. How deftly he'd managed to perfectly balance two different sides of his life. Would an open declaration followed by a final goodbye have been better?

'I'm so sorry to hear that, Myra,' I cried and then pulled her in for an embrace.

'It is what it is. We can't do anything,' she said with resignation.

'But I'm always going to be there for you. And now onwards, you'll share all your problems with me. Promise me.'

'Alright, mummy.I promise'

'Good girl.'

On Saturday night, I went out to watch a movie with my cousin Jess, who was in London for a few days. Jess, who was a few years older than me, was the daughter of dad's oldest brother; she was a chemical engineer working on a fat salary in Berlin. I wanted to bring Myra along, but Jess said it had to be the two of us only. Myra was leaving for work, so I gave her a spare key and told her I'd dumped dozens of frozen pizza boxes in the refrigerator.

'Yeah, I'll manage, don't worry,' she said.

I was glad she wasn't acting as diffidently as I'd expected- though I was wrong to think that way because she never really was the shy type- anyway, we were getting along pretty well and it was actually fun having a roommate.

¹³⁶
I met Jess outside the cinema at five pm sharp. Jess was notorious for her tardiness, she'd make you wait until you were on the brink of pulling your hair out of vexation, then, suddenly, she'd appear out of the corner saying,

'Sorry, my blow-dryer wasn't working, or I slept and then forgot' as if it was plausible enough.

This time there was no exception, and she conscientiously made sure that I had to wait for an hour. The movie was to begin around six, so had another reason to arrive late. Heaven knew, why did I follow her instructions to be there by five?

While I was waiting outside, with my back against the wall and feet endlessly drumming on the floor, I felt as

if I was being watched. It was a very unfamiliar feeling, making me self-conscious and discomfited. I couldn't really figure out where this glare was coming from, but I knew it was sharp and well-focused, cutting right through the throngs of people surrounding me; I felt translucent as if those layers of clothes I was wearing failed to cover me up. After a while, I got apprehensive, and contemplated scurrying into a nearby clothing shop and hiding myself in some corner where I couldn't be seen. What was wrong with me? Was I being paranoid? Maybe the lack of social interaction had turned me into an irrationally anxious creature? I wasn't even near calming my nerves when something very strange happened.

Someone passed near me, almost thrust his elbow inside me, and stood with his face so close to mine that I could smell his breath.

'Who are you?' I yelled, but he quickly disappeared into the long queue in front of the ticket box.

A few heads turned to glance in my direction, looking at each other as if to confirm whether I really was a lunatic. Just then Jess walked up from behind.

'Hellooooo, Rachel,' she chirped in her usual flamboyant way.

'What the hell took you so long? It's been an hour, Jess,' I tried to sound as bitter as possible.

'Sorry, actually, the waiter who brought me room service toppled over and hurt his ankle.'

'What?' I asked incredulously.

‘Yeah, poor fellow. Must have been some jinx or something.’

‘Jess, I’m asking how is this all related to you being late?’ I asked apathetically.

‘Obviously, I couldn’t leave the poor guy over there. I waited with him until he got bandaged. And that’s what I was supposed to do.’

Her explanations were so banal that I didn’t even bother arguing with her. I wondered how her mind was spontaneously able to fabricate so many stories. Maybe she made them up beforehand.

‘Alright, alright. Let’s go in, we’ll miss the start.’

The movie lasted an hour and a half, and we were out within an hour.

‘Are you down for coffee and sandwiches? Or we could have fish and chips if you like. I bet you miss them there in Berlin,’ I asked.

‘I’d love to, but I’m going out with Frank tonight.’

‘Who’s Frank?’

‘My German boyfriend. Great guy,’ she grinned.

‘Alright, I’ll catch up with you later.’ And then we were off our own ways.

I had barely covered a mile, when that feeling of being closely scrutinized returned. The feeling returned with a heightened intensity and doubled tangibility . All this wasn’t happening because of paranoia, but because I knew someone was following me: his footsteps quick

and forceful like small thuds, his breathing steady and controlled, and his shadow- projected on the footpath- continuously revolving and its outline dissolving, as if he was some alien from outer space.

It was getting dark and London was strangely so isolated that day. I got scared all the more, because the street I was approaching was unbelievably empty. There wasn't a single pedestrian, and those who did occasionally pass on the street directly opposite, had hats on, headphones plugged in, and were indifferent and preoccupied- the quintessential London style. I mulled over my options; I could either turn around or confront this guy, or I could start running as fast as I could.

Eureka! I mumbled.

¹³⁹
I knew just what I had to do. Walking at my normal pace, I rummaged through my handbag for my Chanel No 5- I was upset at wasting it on this stranger, but I had to save my life- I quickly made a mental note to take out a hundred and fifty pounds from this marauder's wallet to replace the perfume wasted.

Then without wasting another second, I turned around and flung my arms in the air in a sort of attacking gesture, and started spraying, my aim direct and unswerving. The stranger let out a loud moan, and then shielding his eyes with his hands, collapsed to the ground- I deserved a toast.

But just as I was about to run, he took hold of my hand and in an attempt to shake him off the bottle fell from my hand and shattered! I couldn't believe my eyes: MY

CHANEL NO 5 WAS ON THE GROUND, ALL SPLINTERED AND WASTED.

I was in absolute agony; now, instead of running and saving my life, I was preparing myself for a big fight. Not only that, but I wouldn't leave until I got a three hundred pound compensation at least. Hence, with the count of three, I launched myself on this man.

'Do you have any idea what you've just done? You fucking pig,' I shouted, while punching him three times in the ribs.

But I guess my movements weren't strategic and planned enough, because this stranger had very skillfully turned the table upside down, and the next second I found myself pinned underneath him.

He took hold of both of my wrists and pulled my arms_____ up my head. Shit, this man is going to rape me and throw my body away. The end is here. I'm going to die. Goodbye beautiful world. I quickly began scanning my brain for the moves I'd once learned in a self- defense class back in grade nine. Mum had taken me there that summer, and they'd taught us to push your knees upwards as hard as possible, aiming for the groin, and then quickly slipping out as your attacker fell to the ground; That is exactly what I was about to do.

But before I could spur into action, he softly began whispering my name in my ear.

'Enough, Rachel, it's alright. I'm not going to hurt you. Stop overacting.'

The familiarity of the voice struck me.

Oh God, I know this guy. Who is he? I've heard him before. Who is he? I pressed hard on my mind to come up with this man's identity, but it simply refused to comply.

Furthermore, his face was concealed by the thick navy blue scarf and burgundy sport's cap that covered as much as his whole eye region. However, he saved me the trouble of anguished recalling by taking off his hat, and I gasped on realizing he was no other than Tom Hiddleston's look alike!

'Are you insane?' I kicked him with my free leg.

'Calm down, Rachel! I can explain.'

'Get off me this second or I'm calling the police.'

My threat did work because he actually got cold feet and immediately jumped off. He offered a hand to help me to my feet, but I pushed it away and yelled,

'You moron, you've damaged pretty expensive stuff here.'

'Come on, it's not that expensive.'

'Have you ever tried buying it? I snapped.

'I've bought it for previous girlfriends,' he replied whimsically.

'Go to hell.'

I rolled my eyes and started walking in the opposite direction. Since the perfume still stung his eyes and blurred his vision, it took him a moment to rub and

wipe before he was steady enough to start following me again.

‘Hey, wait a second,’ he called from behind, but I continued to walk as fast as I could.

Quickly covering the distance between us, he asked, ‘Aren’t you going to ask why I was following you?’

‘I don’t give a damn. Besides, I often get followed by pigs like you. So it’s nothing new,’ I snapped.

‘Really?’ he sneered.

‘What do you mean ‘really’? Are you trying to imply that I’m not desirable enough?.

‘Oh, so you’re saying I’m following you because you’re desirable?’

¹⁴²
His question left me with no words. Finding myself running short of contemptuous words to throw back, I decided to end the conversation.

‘I really don’t know where this conversation’s heading. Just leave me alone.’

‘Okay. But you sprayed a pretty generous amount of your Chanel No 5. Won’t it be kind of you to ask if my eyes are still hurting?’

‘I’d rather wish you turn blind.’

‘Well, unfortunately that’s not happening- for the time being at least. So you’d have to see this beautiful pair of eyes every day,’ he replied with a little laugh.

Oh God, I wish he’d been blessed with a more pleasant sense of humor.

‘Fine.’

‘So, I guess, I’d have to compensate you.’

‘Compensate me?’ I inquired

‘I’ve destroyed pretty expensive stuff here, remember?’ he replied with a sardonic curve of the lips.

‘Well, you’d be kind enough if you do,’ I sneered.

Then I got in the taxi, which I luckily spotted parked just within proximity, and told the driver to start driving right away. I turned around and only when this man was no longer within sight, I heaved a sigh of relief.

10. More into the sparkle

On Sunday morning, I woke up to the sound of the bell. It rang three times to be exact, and since my bell was pretty loud and clear, I wondered if she heavily dosed on sleeping pills or whether she had a greatly impaired sense of hearing. Too weary from last night’s events, I reluctantly got up and opened the door to find Alex standing with a black bag in one hand, and brown breakfast bags in the other.

‘Morning,’ he smiled, while putting his bag down to put his arm around me.

‘Seriously? It’s 7 am,’ I sulked.

‘10 35,’ he corrected.

‘Still, by Rachel standards it’s pretty early.’

‘But I’ve got bagels to cheer you up.’

He came inside and directly proceeded towards Myra's bedroom to keep his stuff.

'Hey, not there.'

He turned around and looked at perplexingly. So the cat was out of the bag. Yes, I had to tell him Myra and I were roommates.

'Myra's sleeping.'

'What?'

He shot his eyebrows up as if I told him I'd won a Nobel Prize or something.

'What's so surprising?' I asked.

'You said she was staying at a friend's place,' he asked back, confusedly.

'Well, yeah, I lied. She's living here for the time being.'

'Great,' he smiled.

'Get coffee ready, I'll be back in ten minutes and then we'll have breakfast.'

When I came out, the smell of coffee wafted in the air and breakfast looked like a colorful display of flowers: bagels, crimson red berries, bright yellow scrambled eggs, and avocado slices.

'That's so sweet of you, Alex,' I beamed.

'Is that a compliment or sarcasm?'

'Both,' I giggled.

'Shouldn't we wake Myra?' he asked.

‘She slept late last night. Won’t be up before noon.’

Settling down, I started devouring a bagel topped with berries, while Alex handed me my mug of coffee. Between shoveling in morsels, I threw a string of questions at him, starting with mum and dad.

‘Have talked to mum recently?’

‘Yeah. Matter of fact, she called last night. She seemed pretty concerned for you.’

‘Concerned for me?’

‘Yep. She was like you don’t call anymore and maybe London’s difficult for you to manage.’

‘God, Alex, she still thinks I’m a frantic fourteen-year-old. I’m about to turn twenty and that’s old enough to manage.’

‘You’re never going to grow up, Rachel. We all know this,’ he replied guilelessly.

‘But still somebody needs to drill the facts in her head.’

‘I’ve promised her to visit next weekend, and I’d appreciate if you come along.’

‘I’ll think about it.’

All this time, Alex couldn’t help but glance towards Myra’s door. I knew from the moment I’d told him she was here, the spirit of an impatient child took over him—he couldn’t keep his feet on the ground, and I was expecting him to leap from his seat and start knocking on her door.

Following his gaze, I said, 'Don't worry, she's a heavy sleeper.'

Meeting my eye and realizing that I knew where his gaze hovered, he blushed a little.

'I didn't say anything,' he vindicated.

'Hmm.'

I got up and started clearing the counter, when I heard the door open and Myra, dressed in a black tan top and mini cotton shorts, walked out.

'Rachel, I slept like I'd been drugged and...' she said groggily while still rubbing her eyes but stopped when she saw Alex.

'Hi there,' Alex grinned.

'Hello,' she reciprocated.¹⁴⁶

'Morning. Breakfast's still hot. I was thinking why we don't go for a stroll on Oxford Street. It's all nice and sunny, plus it's Sunday. Alex, do you wanna join?' I began to prattle on.

But she wasn't interested in my rambling. Putting her hair up in a messy bun, she sat down on the couch and began to stare at the TV.

'Myra? Are you listening?' I asked.

Alex looked in her direction with concern.

'Yeah, sure. Give me ten minutes I'll go get ready.'

'Great. Plus, there's this fifty percent sale on Next. Better stock on this year's wardrobe,' I raved.

Meanwhile, I got up and disappeared to get ready. I later learned from Myra that Alex had gotten up and taken a spot next to her.

‘I hope you’re doing alright,’ he asked.

‘So I guess Rachel has told you everything,’ she replied.

‘Yeah kind of.’

At this point, he couldn’t control himself anymore and moved closer until she could feel his breadth on her skin.

‘Myra, you know I...um, I,’ he stammered.

She later told me she felt foolish for doing what she did after words, but it was distress or maybe surprise at seeing him appear out of the blue that couldn’t make_____ her think straight.

‘I should better go get ready,’ she excused herself.

‘Yeah, okay.’

She did make Alex feel she had absolutely nothing to do with him. She acted as if this mild advancement made her uncomfortable- on the contrary, being so close to him was the best thing that had ever happened to her.

So we got dropped on Oxford Street, and Alex went further to meet his buddies in town. Luckily, I hadn’t wasted this month’s allowances on things already superfluously present, so I was in a position to treat myself as well as Myra. Alex had given me his card,

which I planned to use to stock for groceries- for the next whole year, at least.

After all, mum and dad were way more munificent when it came to Alex asking for more money. After a splurge on a few irresistible brands, and hours of forcing Myra to get something for herself, we decided on treating ourselves to gelato. We'd walked only a few miles away when, on seeing a lady showing off a Chanel bag, I remembered last night's incident.

'You still owe me a lot, mister,' I murmured.

'What?' Myra asked with a bemused smile.

'Ah, nothing.'

'Rachel, are you sure I'm not being a liability by living at your place? I mean, Alex is here, and I'm not sure he's comfortable sharing a room with you.'

'Who said he's sharing a room with me?

'Then what?'

'He'll sleep outside on the couch,' I gestured dismissively.

'But...'

'No buts. He's a guest and you're my roommate. Besides, I think he'll be pretty eager to make a sacrifice for you.'

'Myra?'

'Yes.'

'Can I ask you something?'

‘I’m listening’

‘Do you like Alex? I mean, are you interested in him?’

Her smooth tan skin turned crimson red. Had my question annoyed her, or was she blushing? It was hard to tell.

‘Everybody likes him I guess. He’s just that sort of guy, you know,’ she replied cryptically.

‘Yes but what...,’

I was interrupted by my ringing phone, and it was Alex, who was already there to pick up us. Saved you Myra. You’re a lucky one, I thought.

o

The day passed in a blur, and at night Hardy invited us to a pub for a round of drinks. Alex insisted Hardy wanted to meet me- which I doubt was the case- and since I didn’t want to go alone, I coaxed Myra to come along.

Putting on the dresses we’d bought earlier, and helping do each other’s hair and makeup, we got ready for a wild night out. Alex was already waiting outside, dressed in a crisp white shirt tucked into black pants by the time we came out.

‘Ready ladies?’ he asked with a mischievous raise of the eyebrows.

‘How nice to have such a well-dressed chauffeur at our disposal,’ I laughed while turning to look at Myra, who curled her lips inwards as if to suppress a giggle.

‘How do we look?’ I asked.

‘Gorgeous. Beyond words actually.’

But his gaze lingered somewhere behind me where Myra was standing and fixing her hair. In a long red off-shoulder gown, which perfectly clung to her straight, slender figure, it was hard for me too to keep my eyes off her.

‘Let’s get going,’ I jumped.

The pub we went to was unlike those I’d seen back in childhood. London had an extra hype to everything: in everything you found wildness, lack of controllability, and no boundaries at all- mum was not entirely wrong in her place to worry about London being too much for me.

¹⁵⁰
‘Hi, guys. Thanks for coming,’ Hardy greeted as we shook hands.

Contrary to what I was expecting, Hardy was the kind of guy who’d take you on a date and then stare at your plate all the time without putting a single bite in his mouth.

‘How can you be Hardy?’ I blurted.

‘Why? What’s wrong?’ he tried to laugh it off, but it was visible he’d taken quite a lot of umbrage.

‘You weren’t like this in high school,’ I explained.

I wasn’t being blatant because anybody would have expressed concern to the same degree as me: he was practically a living vegetable. He had spindly legs, drooping arms, and I was sure it would fit within the

loop of the necklace I was wearing. All this combined to give him the lanky look of someone who was terribly in need of glucose injections.

‘Oh, thanks for noticing. I’ve been hitting the gym lately,’ he smiled shyly.

What? I muttered to myself. I almost rebuked with an exaggerated movement of the head. It was hard to believe that he took my criticism as a compliment and was actually proud of it.

‘This is my friend Myra,’ I introduced her as she extended a hand forward.

‘Nice to meet you.’

‘Same here.’

He ~~led~~ us to a corner where he’d reserved two large_____ tables. Around them sat ten to fifteen university students, five girls and the rest of them boys.

‘Our greatly anticipated guest is finally here,’ Hardy announced while gesturing towards Alex.

Everybody cheered and hollered. It was hard to reason why Alex wouldn’t be popular.

‘Hi, mates,’ Alex smiled while waving his hands in the air.

Most of them were final year students, and Myra and I were clearly the youngest. They caroused and joked amongst themselves, but a few girls and a boy named Gabe were kind enough to not ignore our presence completely.

‘So you guys are political science students, right?’ he asked.

‘Yep,’ we nodded in unison.

‘You could sign up for English literature classes as well,’ he suggested.

‘I was actually considering that,’ Myra smiled.

‘You should. A couple of my classmates have opted for that combination,’ he said.

Gabe did seem like a great guy. With cropped brown hair, soft gray eyes, and a warm smile, it was difficult not to start a conversation with him. But this conversation wasn’t heading where I wanted it to. In fact, it was getting acutely boring. So I excused myself, and walked up to the bar for a few cocktails. As I began my round of drinks, I saw Myra and Gabe gleefully chatting along, giggling and smiling, and occasionally pushing each other slightly on the shoulder. At least she’s having fun with somebody.

But as I began to load on martinis, my head began to churn and my vision became dizzy, and a drowsy stupor took over me. Still I was clearly able to see and register what happened the next moment ; one second I was looking somewhere else, and the next second, when I glanced back, I saw Myra and Gabe kissing. Pushing her against the wall, he had one hand in her hair and the other on her cheek and he kissed her passionately, fiercely, relentless. They actually looked cute together.

I was heavily drunk, which added to my intrinsic madness, so I started to guffaw uncontrollably- I knew this kiss wasn't going to elicit a pleasant response from Alex. I glanced towards him and saw exactly what I had expected: he stared at them helplessly, eyes bloodshot red, and fists balled up with so much inward force, I was sure the dense network of veins on his hand would burst open. Brushing away the coquettish girls and garrulous friends surrounding him, he excused himself and walked towards me.

'You're in the wrong place, Mr. Alex,' I smiled while beckoning my head in Myra's direction.

The insane amount of drinks were clearly getting to my head.

'Why would I care?' he replied in a cavalier shrugging of the shoulders.

'Come on. Let's get you out of here.'

And he put his shoulder underneath my arm and lifted me off my feet. They had stopped kissing, but Gabe was whispering something in her ear. As we passed the entrance, without saying a single word, Alex knocked Gabe off with his free hand and firmly taking hold of Myra's hand, he pulled her along. And that is how our night of carousing was finally over.

I was too unconscious to make sense of anything that happened in the car, and I fell asleep anyway. But I'm sure neither uttered a single word on our way home.

Once we were back, Alex carried me to my bedroom and tucked me in bed, whereas Myra, enraged as she

was, sat down on the couch with her arms crossed. It was only when he was out that the real show began.

‘What do you think you were doing?’ Alex shouted.

‘Having fun like every other person,’ she replied offhandedly.

‘With a philanderer like Gabe? Nothing matters to him, Myra. He was going to have fun for the night and forget about everything the next morning!’ he raged indignantly.

‘So what? That isn’t your problem,’ she shot back.

‘And I’m not your girlfriend,’ she said slowly.

Alex moved an inch closer, then closed his eyes and took a long, deep breath.

¹⁵⁴
‘Myra, you have absolutely no idea what you’ve been doing to me ever since I first saw you,’ he whispered.

‘I can’t stop thinking about you, and it’s so damn hard to look anywhere else when you’re in the room. I don’t know what’s happening to me, but there’s definitely something incomplete.’

Myra stood there, her face devoid of color, breath unsteady, and palms clammy. She felt as she couldn’t breathe and that every gulp of air required an immense amount of effort- both to be thrown out and taken in- that’s what she told be later onwards.

‘Myra? Are you listening?’ Alex repeated softly.

Instead of agreeing she did feel the same way, just like in most romance novels, Myra- who has a disposition to always take the opposite path- started crying.

‘The tears came out suddenly, I had no control over them’ that’s how she put it after words.

Rivulets streamed down her cheeks, falling on her bare shoulders, and sliding into the narrow space between her dress and the skin of the chest area.

‘Why are you crying? Did I say something you didn’t like?’ he asked while reducing all the distance between them and taking her hands in his.

‘I don’t want you to play games with me. I’ve already got an abundant share of problems,’ she said underneath her breath.

¹⁵⁵
‘Myra, this is not a game, and I’m certainly not the type you think I am,’ he said, a bit offended and shocked at her presumptions.

‘You have no reason to like me when there are hundreds of Barbie dolls out there desperate to cling to you. And one more thing. I didn’t kiss Gabe because I wanted to; I kissed him because I saw you caress that blonde girl’s cheek. I went ballistic,’ she blurted out.

‘And may I ask, why did you go ballistic?’ Alex asked with a mischievous smile.

He had found his answer. Myra did resoundingly excel in the art of keeping things under cover, but Alex had very tactfully pulled the snail out of its shell.

‘Your silence is a tacit yes, isn’t it? he prodded.

‘I don’t know. You did succeed in luring me, well that’s what men like you do, but I’m not sure if...’ she started to ramble with a deep, arcane smile- a cryptic, only those in the process of drifting into a haze, while still retaining control of the surrounding reality- as a prerequisite for survival- can understand.

But she was saved of another hour of prattling, because Alex immediately cut her off by pulling her in completely. Softly pressing her into his chest as if to protect against an unexpected blizzard, he took her face in his hands and then started kissing her with an intensity more fierce than a already blazing fire being fuelled.

And they didn’t stop- even when they should have. They kissed and kissed, intermittently stopping for quick gasps of her, and then resumed with heightened passion and desire.

‘You guys should sign up for a kissing contest, you’ll make it to the Guinness Records,’ I joked when Myra first described it to me.

But then when I noticed that their lips were actually terribly swollen the next morning- like a professional boxer punching them all night out of aggression- I realized she wasn’t lying.

When they did pull apart, Alex traced the curve of her lower lip with his finger. He kept moving his finger over her face, tracing each and every cut and edge, pausing at the gentle points to draw small concentric circles.

'I dreamed about this moment every day. I can't believe we just kissed,' he smiled.

'Well, it was pretty different from what I imagined. There was something missing,' she teased.

'Really? This means we'll have to try over and over again,' he said playfully.

'I'm sleepy already,' laughed Myra.

And then she was up in Alex's arms and down on the sofa with Alex propped up on top of her. Their mouths met again, tongues touched, breath mixed and an endless session of moans, pants, and breathless sighs began. I actually woke up at 4 am to plug in my headphones, and put on some soothing lullaby to get a few hours of peaceful sleep.

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Now that Alex and Myra were a thing- or to be more accurate- were gradually turning into a thing, the pillars of my life started to stumble- as if pushed by a vehemently howling wind- and threatened to fall over. It's not that I wasn't elated to see my brother on top of the world and Myra more ebullient than ever, but I felt left out even in the most subtle ways.

Myra knew about my burning insecurities, and did everything possible to ensure I wasn't ignored- even if she had to be a little unreasonable with Alex. He was in London until next weekend, when we were expected to pay a little visit back home. He wanted to spend all his time with Myra, who was sort of his girlfriend now. They'd go out to watch movies, have gelato at weird

timings, visit sushi restaurants for dinner, but she insisted that I come along with her. I did feel awful for marring their good moments, but I was a bane: not only ruining their happy moments, but also pouring in malaise in abundance in my very own life.

I wanted to date someone, in fact, I was desperate to get hold of any moron I found: stinky, unhygienic, languid, over-eater, liability, an unexciting meat loaf — I really didn't care. At that time, desperation, which gave birth to colossal amounts of frustration, stemmed solely from the desire to remove the label of being 'single'.

I was fed up with seeing Becca sniggering every day when she'd see me walking alone.

'You were born to die as a virgin,' she'd say.

'I'm not a virgin, darling,' I shot back.

When I explained to Myra the quandary I was in, she'd calmly comfort me not to run after things that were running away from us, when we know the process of covering the distance in between would be unimaginably enervating and self-deprecating.

She did have a shrewd side, and I was able to derive great comfort from the judicious sayings heaven knew where she concocted from, but what did she mean by running away from me?

Was I really destined not to love and experience being loved? All my previous relationships had been mistakes, impetuous mistakes one after another, which not only failed to satiate my increasing desire to be loved, but left

large vacant holes I had to delve in to find answers to my perversely wretched love life.

Thomas, for instance, whom I'd met somewhere back in high school, told me to my face that I needed to keep my sarcasm under control, otherwise I'd never be able to get along with anybody. I guess he was right.

Anyway, as Myra and Alex's romance continued to flourish, I found my own spirits withering at an unprecedented pace. I found myself always brooding over the fact if I was predestined to spend my life in morbid isolation. I wouldn't have been isolated of course, that was a histrionic stretching of the bow, but I would be totally devoid of love-unless I chose my angelic neighbor Becca, to be my life partner and start a family together- that would my last day on earth, for sure. ¹⁵⁹

However, not being in a relationship had its own benefits. My assignments were always on time, I came prepared to answer during lectures, and the professors actually started appreciating the recently acquired, scrupulous work ethic. Though I'd been single ever since I'd moved to London, and dating had never been an area of distraction, seeing Myra and Alex made me restless and compelled me to work towards something which had been pretty evasive so far: getting straight As.

On Thursday, I was walking out of a world history class when I heard someone call my name behind me. I turned around to find a recent addition to my conundrums: the Chanel No 5 destroyer. This time I actually wished I had a bludgeon I could stab right in

his tummy. As if the damage done wasn't enough, he was running after me again to find ways to sabotage me.

'If you're here to put up another fight, don't you dare come near me,' I warned.

'Why would I do that with so many people around? I'd rather follow you on again on a dark night,' he laughed.

I rolled my eyes and turned around to walk away. Just then he drew a small bag from behind his back and held it out to me.

'What's this?'

'A little something for you.'

'I don't want it. There could be a snake inside a ring box.' ¹⁶⁰

'Who said I bought you a ring?' he asked quizzically.

'Well, whatever it is, I don't want it,' I said, a bit embarrassed.

'But I bought it for you, and it's not very nice to refuse a gift.'

And then he pulled out a perfume bottle: the exact one he'd broken. Handing it to me, he apologized for his behavior. Inside, there was a little apology note as well. Feelings rushed in a mixed assortment: I was delighted, felt like a terrible person, ungrateful but at the same time effusively grateful, and apologetic for my relentless bouts of scorn.

‘Umm, thank you, but there was really no need...,’ I began.

‘Well, I think it’s a good thing I broke your bottle. You got a new one in return,’ he smiled.

‘Now can I ask you a question?’ I mumbled.

‘Go on.’

‘Why were you following me that night?’

‘Ah finally. Alright, let’s begin by the fact I find you intriguing. You weren’t talking to me in class, so I decided to find out about your whereabouts. And I swear it wasn’t planned. I’m not a professional stalker or something, it just happens that I found you standing in line for the same movie,’ he explained.

‘Right,’ I said with an understanding smile._____

‘Would you like to have dinner with me tonight?’

‘Sure.’

‘There’s this new Thai restaurant in St James market. I’ll pick up at 6.’

‘No. Don’t pick up me up. I’ll be there on time,’ I stammered, still reluctant to disclose my address to this stranger.

‘I still haven’t got your name,’ I said.

‘James. James Gilbert.’

‘Thank you, James, for this gift. It means a lot. And I’m sorry for spraying in your eyes....’

‘Oh, it never happened.’

‘See you then.’

‘See ya.’

As I walked back to my apartment, I felt something heavy rapidly descend towards the bottom of my abdomen. He was a nice guy, after all. Maybe a little foolish and clumsy, and unhinged perhaps, but I already liked him. After all, he was thoughtful enough to apologize, though he deserved an equally abject apology. When I got home, I found Myra sitting in the lounge with her laptop and research papers scattered all over.

‘What’s up?’ I chirped.

‘Working on an assignment. What about you?’

‘I’ve got great news,’ I beamed.

‘My, you are all smiles. Spill the tea.’

‘I’m going out for dinner tonight with this guy, James.’

‘That’s fantastic. I’ll give you a hot makeover.’

‘I’d love that. But I really hope this whole dinner thing isn’t some kind of prank or something,’ I sighed.

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My premonitions originated from a deep abyss inside me that hosted an entire mechanism to readily determine what ran along originality and what had counterfeit buried in its bones. The foreboding of subjecting myself to humiliation, once again, by waiting in the restaurant all alone, with nobody showing up, wasn’t just my own concoction. It was true; it was

deemed to happen, and that's why my mind was warning me all along.

Once again, as if out of habit to embarrass myself, I headed to this new restaurant at exactly six. I took a seat in the corner, and waited for the next thirty minutes. But when he failed to show up I ordered a bottle of champagne, reasoning that his foolish disposition made him mess up everything, so he would definitely not be there before seven. So I waited until seven forty-five. Still there was no sign of him. People around me started to shoot furtive glances in my direction, wondering whether I was inane enough to sit composedly for the next two hours.

I was already at the end of my tether, and thought about leaving, when a waiter came up and asked me to vacate the table immediately.

'Ma'am, it's unreasonable to keep a central table occupied for so long. If you don't mind, we can move with that man in the corner. He's all alone and you could make use of some company himself.'

I turned around and glanced in his direction: a quirky old man with a perfect set of stained teeth. He waved as if he was already anticipating my company. I quickly paid for the champagne and rushed out, not caring to retrieve my change.

Mortified, humiliated, and feeling more foolish than ever, I ambled along the row of eclectic restaurants. I stopped by an Italian restaurant to observe a middle-aged couple sitting near the window, sipping red wine

and feasting on a dish that resembled Spaghetti Bolognese.

It was Friday night after all, people had no reason not to feast, revel, and roister. I then stopped near an Indian restaurant where people- of all races- devoured all kinds of spicy dishes. I contemplated calling Myra and Alex to come near to that restaurant, but I knew they had their own plans. Alex had already promised to take her to a village north of London that apparently had the best fish and chips. What was I supposed to do now? Head back, come and invite Becca over for coffee, given that she didn't have a new chap around.

I was getting hungry, so I stopped by Tesco to grab an ice tea and Tuna sandwich.

Head to Victoria Embankment, find a nice spot and devour your meal, then get back home and start a new Netflix season- this was the plan now. As I trudged on the footpaths, I found myself deriving a strange sense of comfort from the faint glow cast on the road by the streetlights, the smears and shapeless blotches from last night's rain, the closed shops, and deeply enamored lovers walking hand in hand- showing everybody that their days started and ended with each other.

What now? I thought.

Another deceit came by and went away. I decided on sitting there and looking at strangers for hours; it was a lot better than going home, and through the inevitable bout of weeping and lamenting.

Just then my phone rang and an unknown number appeared. Thinking it must be another prank, I ignored the call. But the ringing was incessant: a second, third, fourth time and so on.

‘Who is it?’ I answered abruptly.

‘Rachel, it’s me, James. Why didn’t you come?’

‘You piece of shit, you must be born to a woman of guts, otherwise you wouldn’t have the courage to call me. How dare you humiliate me?’ I hollered.

‘What did I do now? I was waiting for you the whole time,’ he replied calmly.

‘Waiting for me? Are you insane? I was there for two goddamn hours, and you didn’t show up.’

‘Rachel, I swear I was there even before six pm. I had _____ made a reservation, you can call Thai King to check. I bet they have CCTV cameras as proof,’ he said calmly.

‘Wait. Did you just say Thai king?’ I asked.

‘Yes, that’s where I was supposed to take you.’

‘You never mentioned Thai king. You just said Thai restaurant,’ I retorted.

‘That’s because there is no other Thai restaurant there. You see why I was insisting on picking you up,’ he sighed.

‘Then I went to the wrong place, I guess,’ I mumbled abashedly.

‘You sure did,’ he laughed.

‘Where are you now?’ he asked.

‘Victoria embankment.’

‘Stay there. I’m coming.’

‘Okay. Bye.’

After fifteen minutes exactly, I saw James walking towards me from the front. I wondered if he was actually hiding somewhere around and spying on me, because it was impossible to cover such a large distance in minimum time- unless he had super bionic powers, of course.

‘We are the biggest idiots ever born,’ was the first thing he said upon seeing me.

‘Not you, me,’ I said quietly.

‘The ¹⁶⁶blame’s divided in a one to one ratio. I should’ve been more lucid on the phone.’

‘It was a wild day,’ I muttered.

‘Yeah. but I’m glad to spend time with you here,’ he said taking hold of my hand.

‘Rachel?’

‘What?’

‘Do you mind if I kiss you?’

‘Not if it’s a nice, warm one.’

‘I can’t guarantee that, but I’ll try. Maybe we...’

But I tilted my face and pressed my lips against his before he could say anything further. It didn’t last long-

a few seconds maybe- and it was light and sweet, like that of a child kissing his parents for the first time on the lips. It certainly did help to evaporate the irascibility building up inside me.

‘You had tuna, didn’t you?’ he blurted out and then grinned from ear to ear.

‘Yes, and I’m not ashamed because I was starving.’

I wondered why he failed to taste the sweet ice-tea I’d gulped down right afterwards to ward off the smell of tuna. What a creep for not noticing. He’s doing it on purpose, I noted.

‘I didn’t say anything bad. In fact, I really like tuna,’ he smirked.

I stared at him quietly.

‘I’d just like to kiss you one more time to determine what you had after that.’

I started laughing.

‘Well, if you make the right guess, I promise to buy you dinner tonight.’

‘I better concentrate then,’ he joked, and there we were, our lips locked again in another kiss - longer, sweeter, and more serious than the previous one. I liked this guy for his foolishness, and Myra was wrong when she alluded to things running away from me. On the contrary, they were chasing me; I’d just taken an inordinate amount of time to realize this.

We were due to meet mum and dad that weekend, but mum had called and said there had been a change in plan as they would be out of country for a week.

‘Mum, is everything alright?’ I asked her.

‘Yeah, a couple of important things came up. See you all next weekend.’

‘Love you, mum.’

‘I love you too, Rachel.’

And she hung up. Her voice was prickled by a strange kind of consternation, which made my own voice quiver. I knew something was wrong, but last night’s events had been so overwhelming that I couldn’t bring my mind to focus on anything else.

‘What are the odds of mum going through a crisis? I _____
asked Alex.

‘When has mum been in a crisis?’ he said with a smug.

‘You don’t know anything, Alex. Trust me, you’re as ignorant as a child,’ I replied vehemently, completely incensed.

‘Rachel, I don’t know where are you hinting at, but let’s get this straight. She’s a strong, independent woman with more wealth at her disposal than any woman of her age might have, and coupled with that, she’s got a loving and loyal husband.’

‘You need to add a little dull colors in the picture,’ I scoffed

‘What?’

‘Stay in your dark shell, you’re better off that way,’ I replied disdainfully, and got up to get ready for a night out with James.

I couldn’t blame Alex, but I despised him sometimes for being so innocent and failing to recognize the despicable side of our father. Or maybe he knew, and he hid it from me just like I did? Maybe he carried secrets heavier than mine and chose to let it continue that way? On the very first day I learned of dad’s deception, I embarked on an odyssey of confusion, denial, conflict of love and hatred, aversion as well as adoration, self-effacement, and yes, most importantly, self- detestation- all fuelled every time I saw my dad.

‘Rachel?’ Myra knocked on the door.

‘Yes?’
_59

‘I’m leaving.’

‘What? No.’

‘I’m going to visit family,’ she replied.

‘Oh, I thought you’re leaving for good.’

‘Don’t worry, I ain’t going anywhere.’

‘How long before you’re back?’

‘A few days or maybe a week. Not more than that.’

‘Good. I’ll miss you and if you need anything I’m just one call away.’

‘I know. Hey, are you sure you’re doing well with this guy, James?’

‘A little quirky, but more on the pesky side. You’ll love him.’

‘Alright. See you then,’ she said and left after giving me a peck on the cheek.

Apparently, Alex was of the view that he’d overstayed his visit, so he needed to back at Cambridge, but of course, my sarcasm hit him a bit too much. I’d simply stated facts, and even if they were acerbic I didn’t care—facts were, after all, facts. But this time I didn’t aggrieve over being left alone: time alone meant a discovery period with James, which was greatly anticipated and warmly welcomed. I was already dreaming about movie nights, takeaways, midnight coffees, and lazy afternoons. I hoped it would bring in a sense of completion, a filling of the vacancy that I craved for.

The next week, which I’d call an Alex and Myra free week, was hardly spent without not seeing James a single day. We did have regular interactions during classes, but they were rudimentary—intended to avoid eliciting any sort of suspicion. Back in my apartment, however, we did all sorts of things. We’d order pizza at midnight and topped it with Ben and Jerry’s chocolate brownie and blueberries; we’d make coffee in the afternoon, and leave our untouched mugs as we both crept into deep somnolence; one second we’d be bickering and the other we’d be in the midst of passionate sex; since James was practically living at my place, he didn’t bother bringing in his clothes from the dormitory, so he roamed around in my oversized hoodies.

When I told him about my blazing rivalry with Becca, the plans he conjured up would spur the most malicious desires inside me. Things I couldn't think about in school now became my right hand's trick. One day, for instance, he persuaded me to let the drunkard he'd gotten hold of from some forsaken part of London, piss on her door. At first I outrightly disagreed, saying that we came from decent families that would have never condone such churlishness, but what was so wrong in having a little fun. After all, no one more churlish than Becca had ever existed, so in any case we would be spared the stigma of extreme indecency.

'Let it flow out,' I hollered wildly.

And there came a perfect yellow foundation, fast flowing and altitudinous, landing with perfect precision on a spot where it leaked in through the door and _____ started widening its spread on her floor.

'Hooray!' all three of us cheered.

'How about applying a little pressure at the back,' I winked at the drunkard.

'At your service.'

But this time I asked James to stand with him as he finished off the job, because neither the smell nor the sight of it was within bearable boundaries. However, just for the satiation of any desire to destroy, ruin, and wreck, I crept outside and took a picture of the beautiful mess this angel had made- which made joy burst inside me like a billion fireworks. James was a key, a key that unlocked the chests of exuberance and

happiness inside me. If all the people out there call him wicked, and insinuated that I'd be sharing his label soon if I didn't leave him, I didn't care; I was happy for being the perfect demon and witch couple. Life did feel like living, for the very first time.

11. END OF THE GREATEST DECEPTION.

Contrary to what she had promised, mum didn't call. Nor did I hear anything from Alex. Myra, however, returned after a few days and upon learning about my booming relationship she busied herself to the point where I barely felt she existed- though she shared the room adjacent to mine.

But even though she wasn't around too often, whenever we got time to sit down together, she did make sure to express her intense disapproval and shock at my distaste, and I hated her for that.

'You aren't realizing that guy's not good for you,' she said with distress.

'But, Myra, we've got a fine rapport, and he makes me feel so good in every little way,' I argued.

'Those little things are actually sinister ways. Look what has he turned you into.'

'What do you mean?' I growled.

'You need to stop seeing him. And it's for your own good.'

'And you need to stop sticking your nose in my business. That's for your own good,' I scorned.

After that conversation, I barely talked or even saw her; sometimes I managed to stay awake until midnight when she returned from the second job she had taken, or woke up at six in the morning when she left without her sole survival fuel- black coffee. I considered Myra to be too presumptuous and even jealous, when she had blatantly said James wasn't good. But very soon I found myself contemplating over her words, especially after one night when he did cross his limits.

I was sleeping when a high-pitched yanking sound followed by a loud thud woke me up. I moved my arms around to feel if he was still in bed, but his place was empty. Careful not to make a squeaking sound, I raised my head a little only to find him going through my pile of personal documents- all sorts of documents, from my passport to a copy of my parent's marriage certificate- which I kept hidden underneath my bed. I was aghast to see him scanning through each one of them with the help of his phone's light.

What the hell is he doing with them? And how did he find them? I wondered. I continued to watch him for the next few minutes, but as soon as he started putting them away, I pulled the cover over my head and made exaggerated snoring sounds to feign deep sleep. The next morning I told him I was no longer comfortable with him being around, and that if we had to meet, I would come over to his place.

He agreed without raising an eyebrow. Immediately, after he left, I retrieved the hidden suitcase and counted all the documents, but found one missing- the

one I had suspected to be taken- and that was my parent's marriage certificate.

Myra did, after all, have an unerring sense of judgment.



'Just act normally,' I said and then rolled my eyes.

I was on the edge of my patience with James now. Over the last few months, his growing interest in my family and eagerness to leave no detail undiscovered, aroused great suspicion in my. He never bothered asking what did I like, what were my hobbies, or what did I want to do with my life. Instead, he kept on prodding me to tell him more about my family and insisted on meeting them as soon as possible.

¹⁷⁴
I, however, decided not to confront him after he stole the documents: I knew there was simply a lot more than the apparent silly and witty boyfriend he pretended to be, and if I had to unveil the truth I had to operate surreptitiously.

'Your mum's going to like me, right?' he flashed me a nervous look.

'Why wouldn't she? She'll be over the moon.'

'Is Myra coming along?' he badgered.

'Of course, James! You can very clearly see that Alex can't survive without her. Now stop asking questions, please,' I snapped irritatingly.

It was mid-June, and having the spring semester finished and summer break waiting ahead, we decided

to respond to mum's renewed plans which had already gone through a lot of procrastination. She'd called a few days ago and asked if we were interested in spending a week or so at our summer estate in St Ives, Cornwall.

Alex and Myra had been there for then a week now- the whole week that I'd spent ruminating whether it would be a good idea to bring James along. As I sat on his bed, watching him frenetically toss in his stuff in a dark blue bag, I immediately regretted my decision. I'd already lied to him about Myra and Alex already being there, saying that they would arrive pretty much at the same time as us. If he expressed over excitement just for the sake of portraying his deep involvement and commitment to me, it did nothing but to make me highly uncomfortable. Even the sight of him had started evoking a strange sort of revulsion in me, inflamed by the thought of all the nasty things he'd make me do. Once summer's over, I'm done with this clown. I'll get back to my previous James-free life then, I promised myself.

'Alright, see you tomorrow at the airport,' I said.

'Don't be late.'

That night back in my apartment I called mum. It had almost been six months since I last saw her- it was true London did turn you into an indifferent rat- and I was sure I'd break into tears the moment I'd see her.

'Mum,' I mumbled, my voice cracking with tears.

'Rachel? Sweetheart? What's wrong?'

‘Mum, I miss you terribly. I can’t wait to see you,’ I wept.

‘I know. Me too,’ she said dejectedly.

I could almost picture her smiling the way she did: head stooped downwards and fingers entwined together.

‘I think Alex is pretty serious about Myra. I bet he’s already thinking about marriage. What do you think?’

‘I don’t know, mum. But Myra is an amazing person,’ I said wearily.

‘Vogue material, I’d say. You should see the way all the people have their eyes fixed on her when she’s swimming,’ she laughed.

‘Alright, mum. I’m going to catch up on some sleep_____ before heading to the airport. See you tomorrow.’

‘Love you, Rachel.’

‘Love you too.’ But instead of going to sleep, I drank three glasses of vodka and then threw up. James was definitely the source of all the mental strain clamoring outside my head, but no matter how long I had to bear with it, I wouldn’t give up until I found what he had to do with my family.

ð

Arriving in St Ives was like journeying into an ethereal land- a small part of heaven- that promised to mollify the great anxieties of your life. I loved coming here as a child with grandma and grandpa, who’d leave no area of exhilaration untouched. From boating to listening to

horror stories on the patio outside, it was simply the best time of our childhoods. Once grandpa, who still was a handsome and well built man, was invited by a middle-aged woman, maybe in her fifties or sixties, to come have a drink with her that night. Timorously eyeing grandma, who gave him a sharp look of disapproval and caution to warn him to reassess the ramifications of his action- and poor grandpa, who had already started shivering, immediately refused.

But the woman had approached him with obstinate determination, as she continuously insisted on just one drink. Alex and I knew about the growing tension in the air, and just for the sake of amusing ourselves, we insisted him to go.

‘Grandpa, it’s just one drink.’

¹⁷⁷
‘And don’t worry, we’ll take care of grandma.’

‘My dears, you have no idea what’s going to happen to me after words.’

‘Come on, you’re overacting now. It’ll be fine,’ we cajoled in unison.

‘Fine. Let’s see what this woman finds so interesting in me.’

And there he was: our sweet, innocent grandpa going out for a drink with some stranger, all the while fearing the dreadful consequences. For dinner, grandma had made her renowned chicken roast with baked potatoes. As we devoured our meal, she sulked and shot repugnant glances at each of us.

‘I’ve seen you two have got pretty naughty,’ she said spitefully.

‘We love you, grandma,’ we laughed.

Just then, grandpa entered, and she underwent a capricious change of mood. She wasn’t morose anymore, instead she put up her brightest smile. Something wasn’t right, we sensed.

‘Hello, darling. How did it go?’ she asked.

‘Nothing special, she just wanted information on property prices around here,’ he mumbled with trepidation.

‘Oh, that’s fine then. Come have dinner with us,’ she cloyed.

Relieved not be ambushed with a saucepan or three _____ inch stiletto, grandpa smiled at us and sat down on the table. Grandma had already filled his plate, and as he started eating, he smiled as the flavors melted in his mouth.

‘Heaven,’ he uttered between mouthfuls.

‘I know, darling. Now you have to finish it all,’ she said in a babyish voice while viciously eyeing his plate.

He couldn’t have had more than a few bites when he started choking and coughing so loudly that his eyes were filled with tears, which started rolling down relentlessly.

‘Water, water,’ he yelped.

We both panicked, crying and frantically pacing around the kitchen area, thinking he was about to die. But grandma sat perfectly still, composed and calm, unaffected by the ensuing commotion.

‘You put rat poison in it, didn’t you?’ grandpa managed to utter between gasping for air.

‘Oh no, I’m not that churlish. Just a kilo of paprika, eight tablespoons of salt, and a bottle of hot sauce,’ she said calmly.

‘Should I ask that woman to fetch you a drink?’ she scoffed

‘Eleanor I...,’ grandpa tried to say something, but it seemed as if his soul was already out of his body.

The way he contorted his body and plaintively screeched, it was certain he was going to die. But then, with an immaculate composure, grandma walked up to the kitchen cabinets and brought a green drink that looked like alien slime we used to play with.

‘Drink this,’ she said in an ordering tone. Grandpa’s hands grappled to hold the glass steady, so Alex raised his head whereas I held the glass for him to gulp down the liquid. It was like an antidote: A secret tincture that brought him back faster than he’d succumbed to the effect of grandma’s venom. Seeing our poor grandpa return to normality, she scuffed and left the kitchen.

Apologizing for being the source of his suffering, we helped him to his feet and eyed him sympathetically. The miserable look he gave me is something I’ll never forget because that day I realized grandma was not

only a difficult, but a thoroughly depraved and callous woman- a woman who knew how to take revenge and push people behind the boundaries they impetuously crossed them. This was a tactic I had to apply now to teach James a lesson.

ð

Mum and dad were already standing at the door when the car pulled in through the fenced entrance, and came to a halt at the end of the curved driveway.

‘Mum! I missed you so much,’ I exclaimed as I jumped out of the car and rushed to embrace her

‘You look lovely, Rachel. You’re already tanned and toned.’

Dad who was standing right behind mum, looked at me endearingly and pulled out his arms to hug me.

However, my enthusiasm waned considerably when I saw him. This was how it had been going on since the discovery of his deception. Harboring a thousand grievances against him, and at the same time deciding on not to confront him, I was on neutral terms, that is, neither love nor hatred- just normal.

‘Hi, dad. How are you doing?’ I said apathetically.

‘Come here, my princess.’

And then he hugged me nice and warm, something I’d stopped caring about years ago. I quickly pulled away and turned towards mum.

‘Where’s Alex?’

‘Oh, they’re off for a walk for some friends they made at the beach.’

In my wild excitement, I forgot to introduce James, who was still standing next to the car and grinning from ear to ear.

‘Come here, James. Meet mum and dad.’

He lumbered towards us, arduously dragging our luggage along. He made such pretentious movements, with exaggerated puffs and heaves, as if I’d asked him to haul ten-gallon water barrels.

‘He doesn’t require that much effort to eat like an insane pig. Wonder what’s gotten into him now,’ I whispered to mum, who started giggling.

Dropping the suitcases with a thud, he sauntered up the entrance steps and extended a hand to dad.

‘Nice to meet you, Mr. Smith.’

‘Same here. Welcome,’ dad replied affably.

‘Hi, Mrs. Smith.’

‘Hello, and please call me Andrea,’ mum beamed.

‘Alright. You’re a beautiful woman, Andrea. Now I know where my Blondie gets her genes from.’

My Blondie? Did he intend on making me throw up? He is a possessor of a deranged mind, Rachel. Bear with him for a few more days and then throw him away like a used tissue paper, I consoled myself.

Now that the greeting and introductions were done, we moved in and settled in the main sitting area. The

house was expansive, with square windows that had streaks of sun shine dripping in during the day and the white glimmer of the moon faintly illuminating the entire room at night. Outside, towards the right of the main living room window, where the view extended out and towards the serene sky blue waters, there was a giant oak tree where grandpa had attached a swing for me back when we used to be frequent visitors during childhood. Now I stood near the window, my forehead touching its cold white carvings and yearning for those days spent with him. I thought about calling him and asking to join us, but he was old and with the incessant joint pains and all, he preferred not to travel.

‘My god place is huge, Rachel,’ he said, completely wonder- struck. Then, on a whim, he walked up close to me and put his arms around me. I immediately brushed him away.

‘What do you think you’re doing?’ I snapped.

‘What am I doing?’ he tried to act innocently.

‘Stop trying to be so affectionate in front of everybody. You know I don’t like it,’ I grumbled.

‘Rachel, there’s definitely something wrong. I can feel it. I won’t get to know unless you talk to me.’

‘Rachel, I’ve got cherry juice ready,’ mum called from the kitchen. Grateful for this intervention, I rushed off to the kitchen, leaving James to further inspect and scan things around.

‘We’ve got a lot of talking to do, mum,’ I gave her a peck on the cheek.

‘I think Myra’s pregnant,’ she beamed.

‘What? No, it’s not possible. She’s only twenty-one and...’

‘I’m not a hundred percent sure, but it’s likely. I saw used tests in the bin this morning.’

‘Stop it, mum! You should have better things to do than searching for used pregnancy tests,’ I raged.

‘What’s wrong with you?’ mum gave me a perplexed look.

‘I don’t know. Just stop talking about Myra and Alex, please,’ I said in a quivering voice.

And then the tears came out, incessant and unremitting tears, tears that opened up the exact chapter in the book; mum was a voracious reader- not_____ a single word could pass by without being fully deciphered.

‘You’ve known it all along, haven’t you?’ she asked while looking at me directly in the eye- her gaze sharply cutting through the curtains of concealment, and landing right at the vulnerable point- the evocation point- the point where the secret lay buried- the point where the tears were coming from.

‘Who told you, mum?’

‘Do you remember us leaving the country a few months ago?’ she asked apprehensively.

I nodded my head.

‘Well, we didn’t leave for a case. We left to look for that woman’s grave.’

∂

It turns out I was wrong and maybe not perceptive enough, when I realized I’d been viewing my very own existence with an unreasonably high degree of commiseration. I was a sufferer, a bearer of a secret worth a thousand weights, I was emotionally disturbed, let alone to suffer by my father, shed more despairingly droplets than anyone had ever done. This is what I called myself, which in turn elicited a great amount of self-pity that lead to years of dejection and despair.

But even if we start defining ourselves as a great scholar in any particular expertise- which in my case was silence and concealment- we can’t surpass the scholar who brings us into this world. After all, we shouldn’t forget that DNA ,which contains hereditary material, is endlessly being replicated and passed on.

So where does this bring us to?

Well, you’re getting your DNA from your parents, and if they have mastered a particular field you get to master it too. But who surpasses whom? You’ll be foolish to think you can do any better than your parents, because the same skill (which you have inherited) passes through a longer refining machine in their minds, where the length of the machine is defined by nothing except for your years of existence.

That’s a longer way of jotting down a simple fact: your birth giver has lived longer than you, so she surpasses

you when it comes to perfecting a skill you believe you have perfected all your life. Mum's revelation had purloined me of my simple ideal. I realized mum had done everything I could never do. Though nothing could outweigh the fact that I got to know of dad's deception way before her, at a time when she couldn't take her mind off the fact that she'd been blessed with a loyal, caring husband. But the suitcase mum had to carry, even though for a shorter period of time, was heavier; besides, how she'd gotten that suitcase also mattered.

For Rachel, it was the memory of a kiss and a glimpse of naked bodies, which I'd seen because I couldn't let go of my unethical habit of eavesdropping, but for mum it was an entire confession- a dreadful confession of forbidden love- by someone she had loved all her life.

'Rachel, I need you to listen carefully now. You won't_____ask anything until I've said whatever I have to say, understood?'

I again nodded my head in agreement.

'Alright. So here's how it goes. Around the start of March, dad received an envelope with the letter saying 'Your lover's dead'. At that time dad was afraid I might find out, so he burnt the letter. Two days later, another envelope arrived from a foreign address-which made it clear it was sent from somebody outside the country. It had another inscription in bold italics saying 'used her all your life now wouldn't you visit when she's no longer available'.

This time I received the letter, but couldn't get past its ambiguity. When I confronted your father, he gave a

dismissive shrug, denied it to my face, and tore up the letter there and then. I was too blind to believe even a possibility could exist, until I heard him talking on the phone one night. He was instructing someone, maybe a friend or hired assistant, to trace the source of those letters. The apprehension in his voice made it clear whatever was happening wasn't entirely untrue, and then he said it, Rachel, you can't believe what I heard next.

'I shouldn't have let her go,' is what I heard him say loud and clear. I immediately confronted him and demanded a divorce, which caused him to lose control of his composure and he cracked up and told me everything.'

'Everything?' I asked dreadfully.

¹⁸⁶
'Yes, everything. Inez was apparently, his childhood best friend. After her husband's death, she sort of fell apart and resorted to your dad for consolation. 'And it suddenly happened' that's how he put it. He didn't mean to cheat, but once it all started, he had little control over it. It lasted for a couple of years- as long as this woman was in the country- but then this woman found out she was pregnant. Neither of them wanted the baby, so they got it aborted, and she left the country. God knows where she went, however, the affair didn't end there and then. He said he couldn't stop thinking about her, so did make frequent trips to go visit her until a few years ago- when they stopped it seeing each other completely. Dad learned of her death around mid -March, and he insisted on visiting her

grave, but only if I came along. I agreed, but only on one condition, which is divorce.

‘So now you’re getting a divorce?’

‘Yes, we’ll be done with the paperwork by the end of this month?’

‘And does Alex deserve to know?’ I pressed.

‘I don’t see the need. I’ll say it was hard to function as a couple, so we decided to end things?’

‘Rachel? Can I ask you something?’

‘Sure,’ I replied, my eyes already tearing up.

‘Why didn’t you come talk to me if you knew everything?’

I didn’t know what to say. It was so hard to bring _____ myself to tell her that I was weak, maybe threatened, or maybe chastened by the doom that would lurk afterwards.

‘I never wanted to ruin your marriage, but now you’re doing the right thing. He deserves to be punished.’

∂

We walked downstairs to find ourselves in the midst of a great deal of carousing. Everybody had a beer in their hands, dad and Alex stood near the pool grilling hamburgers- something I didn’t even bother paying much attention at- while James sat giggling with Myra. Mum, who followed me downstairs, didn’t feel like joining the party either, so we decided on going for a long walk. We didn’t really care about what other

people thought- we were in this together and alone, so now we decided to do things the way we lived.

‘Hey, Rachel, you didn’t give me a hug,’ Alex called as I walked towards the door. I looked at for a second and gave him an aggrieved look. Then I was out, with mum following shortly behind and slamming the door so hard that no part of it remained intact. We spent an hour walking along the beach, talking, reminiscing, and future planning. Mum considered moving to London, and I was ecstatic to hear that. When she asked about my seriousness with James, I told him he was getting unbearable, and I was seriously thinking about dumping him.

‘Poor fella. Looks like a nice one, though.’

Mum’s words brought the James issue to my mind. The stealing of the document was something that ignore as a mild malfunctioning of the mind. It was something serious and needed to be dealt with immediately. I made a quick mental note to go through his phone for some sort of evidence, and if I couldn’t come up with anything I’d catch him off guard with an immediate confrontation.

‘We can’t find common ground,’ I explained.

‘You say that every time, Rachel,’ she exclaimed.

‘That’s why I’ve started to wonder whether I’m really comfortable being around men. It just doesn’t feel right.’

‘Don’t worry, you’ll definitely find someone someday. It takes time, and everybody isn’t lucky enough to find the right one right away.’

‘I know mum, that’s why I’m trying to bear with this shit I’ve welcomed in my life for a little longer. But I do envy Myra. Have you seen the way Alex looks at her? There’s something so different, something so much deeper between them. When you know you’re in love all your actions change accordingly, but when you feel like you’re in love you focus more on showing the world how affectionate you are and continuously search for ways to show it to your better half, without realizing how you’re bringing profound discomfiture. And now I’ve realized James belongs to the second category.’

‘You’re a gem, Rachel. You know that, right?’ she said, while smiling sympathetically_____

. ‘Tell me something I don’t know,’ I laughed.

We spent hours and hours laughing and chattering, until we realized the sun was about to set, and it wasn’t long before we would have policemen with hounds searching for us. At approximately six forty-five, we were hustling inside, pushing off our wet boots and drying our hair, thanks to an erratic bout of heavy rain on the way. The smell of charcoal burgers whirled, and laughing sounds pervaded the air. We came to an abrupt halt when we found everybody sitting at the table, silent and expressionless, staring at us as if we’d asked them to donate a gallon of blood plasma.

‘Where were you two?’ dad asked.

I didn't reply, but mum retorted, 'Nice to hear somebody asking about us,' mum scowled.

Dad's face lost every single drop of color.

'Mum, what's the matter? We all were worried about you,' Alex interjected softly.

'Alright, let's start eating. And eat more and talk less, people,' James blurted out excitedly.

Alex immediately shot him a sharp, icy stare. It was clear he didn't like him a bit, and especially didn't appreciate this kind of blatant flamboyance, and I couldn't blame him. I was squirming inside with disgust, and if given the opportunity, I would have pressed his face in a grill and turned him into one of those numerous charcoal burgers he had on his plate. I kicked him underneath the table to indicate that he better _____ keep his preposterous opinions to himself because they weren't welcomed here. He yelped in agony, and that brought a huge smile to my face.

Throughout dinner, I didn't talk to either of the three men present. James kept on blabbering, but I chose to ignore him; Alex repeatedly shot me worried glances, and asked me a few questions, but I didn't answer him either.

Dad was, however, my real enigma and source of perturbation, alike. He looked at me furtively, as if to decipher a cryptically encoded message, but couldn't even once summon the courage to look at me in the eye. I immediately figured out that he realized I knew everything. Given the intricacy that hovered over the

dinner table, the only person mum and I talked to was Myra. In order to answer any question (we felt answering) addressed to us from the no-communication side, or to throw back some sarcasm or scorn, we'd face Myra and answer her.

'It's a good relief from university, isn't it, Rachel? Alex asked. Instead, I faced Myra and answered the question to her, 'Yes Myra, I'm loving it here, aren't you?'

She gave me a pleading look to stop acting abnormally, and Alex sighed heavily in mocking surrender.

'Let's clear up then, Myra,' Alex suggested and they both got up to do the dishes. Good for you, I thought.

Mum also excused herself and retreated to her bedroom, whereas James and dad got up for a round of _____ Jess.

Finding the moment more propitious than ever, I ambled up to the library and started speculating things: papers, photographs, diaries, historical documents. I left nothing untouched. Albeit, there wasn't anything to go through now that the whole thing was crystal clear, but the James issue still had to be resolved. Barely five minutes had passed since I had started rummaging, when the door opened and Dad walked inside. He stood near the bookshelf, eyeing me carefully. It was when he cleared his throat that I realized I wasn't the only one present in the room.

'Mum's told you everything, hasn't she?' I kept my back towards him and eyes on my grandparents'

portrait hanging on the wall right opposite. But then an idea crossed my mind: there was no reason to stay quiet anymore.

The thing I'd dreaded the most was gradually shifting from the vastness of my imagination to the realm of reality. Mum was getting a divorce and leaving this disloyal man forever. So what reason did I have to vent and rage and scream? It was time to give voice to the indignation that had been building up inside me all my life. Turning around and looking him sharply in the eye, I said, 'Yes dad, I know everything. In fact, this isn't something new to me. I've known it ever since I first saw kissing in the kitchen.'

Dad was nonplussed. Finally, I thought. I'd waited so long for seeing dad's expressions when I'd confront him. No synonym ever invented could define how _____ profound my happiness was.

'You've got nothing to say for yourself, huh? I'm glad mum's leaving a philanderer like you,' I raged.

'Rachel, can you forgive me?' he said with his eyes swelling with tears.

'I don't know. But if you don't want me to stop seeing you, just leave me alone right now, please.'

'Rachel... I.'

'I said leave, please!' I shouted so loudly that I was sure somebody would definitely come running up.

Mortification makes you immediately let go of all of your pompousness and relegates you from ten to zero on a scale of dignity, and that is exactly what the

weight of shame did to dad. Without saying a word, he stooped his shoulders and lowered his head, and left quietly, slowly closing the door behind him.

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When I entered my room around one thirty, after having three cups of latte and finishing off nearly a whole cheesecake with Myra- who for a chance did summon the courage to put a few morsels in her mouth- I headed to my room. Seeing James fast asleep, I started looking through the stuff he had brought along. I knew it was useless going through the meager items he carried, and the real treasure must be buried somewhere in his apartment. After an hour of useless searching, when I couldn't get my hands on anything, I fell to the bed wearily and drifted into a deep slumber. It was about four in the morning when I woke up to_____ fetch a glass of water. Strangely, the James was not in bed. After two whole chocolate cheesecakes he gobbled down last night, I expected him either to sleep until noon or not wake up at all, which was frankly a better option.

'James? You around?' I murmured groggily.

Silence.

I got up and checked the bathroom. Don't tell me he's in the kitchen finishing off the leftovers. He'd have to sleep on the couch if he doesn't stop overeating. There's a limit to how much my nose and ears can bear. If I find him in the kitchen, I'll offer to make, and then I'll put rat poison- an amelioration of grandma's tactic- and get rid of him forever.

As these thoughts crossed my mind, I walked towards the door but stopped when I stepped on something cold, flat, and slippery.

James's phone!

Yes, why hadn't I thought about this earlier? I could definitely find something useful in his phone. Unlocking his iPhone and punching in the passcode - he'd once murmured in his sleep (I just got lucky that day) - I went through everything: messages, call history, google search history, and even the food apps he'd installed; but couldn't find anything until I opened his gallery and one particular album, named 'Forever together', caught my attention.

At the first glance, I thought he was cheating on me, there had been an immaculate repetition of history, and I'd go through a similar situation as mum, even though I wasn't married to this idiot, and I was already intent on dumping him.

But what propped up on the screen after one click- just one single click- changed my life. When I finally found the key that opened all hidden doors, the ground beneath my feet slipped, the entire space encompassing my existence began to spin rapidly, and I thought I was hallucinating just to get my mind off last night's events. None of it was true. It couldn't be true. And if it was true, then the world had reached its cessation point. INEZ. YOUNG INEZ. LIVELY. SMILING. VIBRANT. It was Inez, the woman who wouldn't stop haunting me even after being dead. The picture had the same face, the face that had kissed dad, and made

mum cry miserable tears. She was smiling at the camera with her arms wrapped around a young boy, with brown curly hair and a familiar face- a very familiar one indeed. It was no other than James- the illegitimate child, the child born out of a scandalous affair, the child who never got to know his father, the child who grew up to date his half-sister.

I put my hand over my mouth to stop myself from screaming; the air in the room squeezed out from the narrow gap underneath the door, and I was left to gasp for breath. The truth was a sharp knife stabbed right into my heart, and pushed forwards and forwards until it moved out, cutting right through layers of epidermis, tissue, blood capillaries, and God knows what else. Things quickly started to make sense as the ignition of mind was fully switched on.

Everything was a façade: a drama, a prefect camouflage of blazing animosity, a pretense of love and camaraderie, for one purpose: reaching dad. Once again, I'd failed to achieve a milestone in my love life: I'd been used and was about to be thrown away, but the only difference was that this time I'd undergone an irrevocable affliction, endured a wound which would change me completely, that is, opting for another path.

I ran to dad's room and found it empty. I checked the living room, guest rooms, kitchen- even rooms that hadn't been opened for the past ten years- but there was no sign of James and dad. I started frantically pacing the length of the hallway, screaming their names again and again. All the other bleary-eyed

residents rushed downwards, and stared at me for an explanation.

‘We need to find James and Dad, he’s going to hurt dad.’ I opened the front door, but Alex pushed me backwards and ran outside. But we were too late. I reckon he’d barely covered a few steps when we heard a loud gunshot, shortly followed by another one.

‘Alex, come inside! Now!’ mum yelled. And that is the last thing I remember from that night’s events.

AFTERWARDS

‘We wasted a lot of time throwing venom at each other,’ she laughed.

‘You were the one who started it all,’ I said with a _____ smile.

‘Well, we both liked the same boy. How else was I supposed to react?’ she again emitted a lighthearted chuckle at those distant memories.

Becca and I had been married for six years now, but we didn’t let a single day pass without remembering where we’d started from. We loved and respected each other, but I was getting fed up with her inability to let go of the past. After all, we were in a much different place than we were in the past.

From high school rivals to ghastly neighbors to lovers and then partners, we’d definitely made a long journey, but I preferred to eliminate the parts involving antagonism, completely. But every day before heading

off to the newspaper office she worked in, she'd conscientiously remind me of the days gone by.

'You bring up this topic one more time, and I'll never return home,' I threatened.

'Then I'd have no one to cuddle at night,' she said in a pretentiously rueful way.

'I'm getting late, see you later,' I said while giving her a slight tap on the shoulder-this was our way. A secret communicative of both, love and irritation, and the other person understood it immediately. I'd never imagined life would have been so much fun with Becca. I adored her beyond everything, and now if anybody asked me to pee at her door, I'd politely reply with a suggestion to pee in their face instead.

That's how I changed- unimaginably, imperceptibly, _____ and drastically; I still couldn't believe it myself.

The police arrived shortly after the gunshots. The cordons were put up, and we warned not to venture beyond the safety area. The incident had apparently taken place in some sandy marshes at a considerable distance from the backside of our villa. The police discovered two bodies, James and Dad, both showing no signs of being battered or bruised, except for one gunshot in each head, which had been enough to tear the skull apart and crack the bones. None of us cried. Mum became as silent as a tree when I filled her in on the rest of the story.

When Alex finally learned the truth, he was so shocked that he refused to move from his chair. I was, myself,

pummeled by a combination of guilt, aversion, regret, and grief. Myra single-handedly took control of all the details that ensued afterwards. Everybody else had been deprived of a perfectly functioning mind. We returned to London the same day, mum selling off the Surrey property and purchasing a small flat next to mine. Alex, who'd already graduated, bought a property in the outskirts of London, which was apparently closer to the firm he was working at. Myra moved in with him, and they planned on getting married as soon as he graduated; we already heard wedding bells. Thus, life did drift back into the realm of normalcy, and everyone found ways to attune themselves to the slightly altered circumstances that came forth as a result of dad's death.

Perhaps I was the one who changed the most, and it wasn't because of dad's death, rather it stemmed from James's deception. If you can't paint a picture well at the first try, you change your paints, ameliorate your skills and then try again. If you fail the second time too, you again check what you're doing wrong, and perhaps seek the help of someone. But if you repeatedly fail, leave it; not because you think you're a failure and there's no one present to embolden you, but because it's simply not meant for you.

Look for another hobby: music, books, sketching etc. When I repeatedly failed to paint a picture, despite an eclectic compendium of paint brushes (from Thomas to that Italian guy to James) I stopped painting altogether. That day, I discovered an essential element of my sexuality: I had never been the one who I thought I'd

been all my life. My path was to be different- its sheer realization brought in a sense of relief, end of struggle and enigma, and rapture in colossal amounts. And I won't go into describing how it happened- it just simply happened- one day I woke up and realized Becca and I were made for each other. Though, of course, it wasn't as simple as it sounds.

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